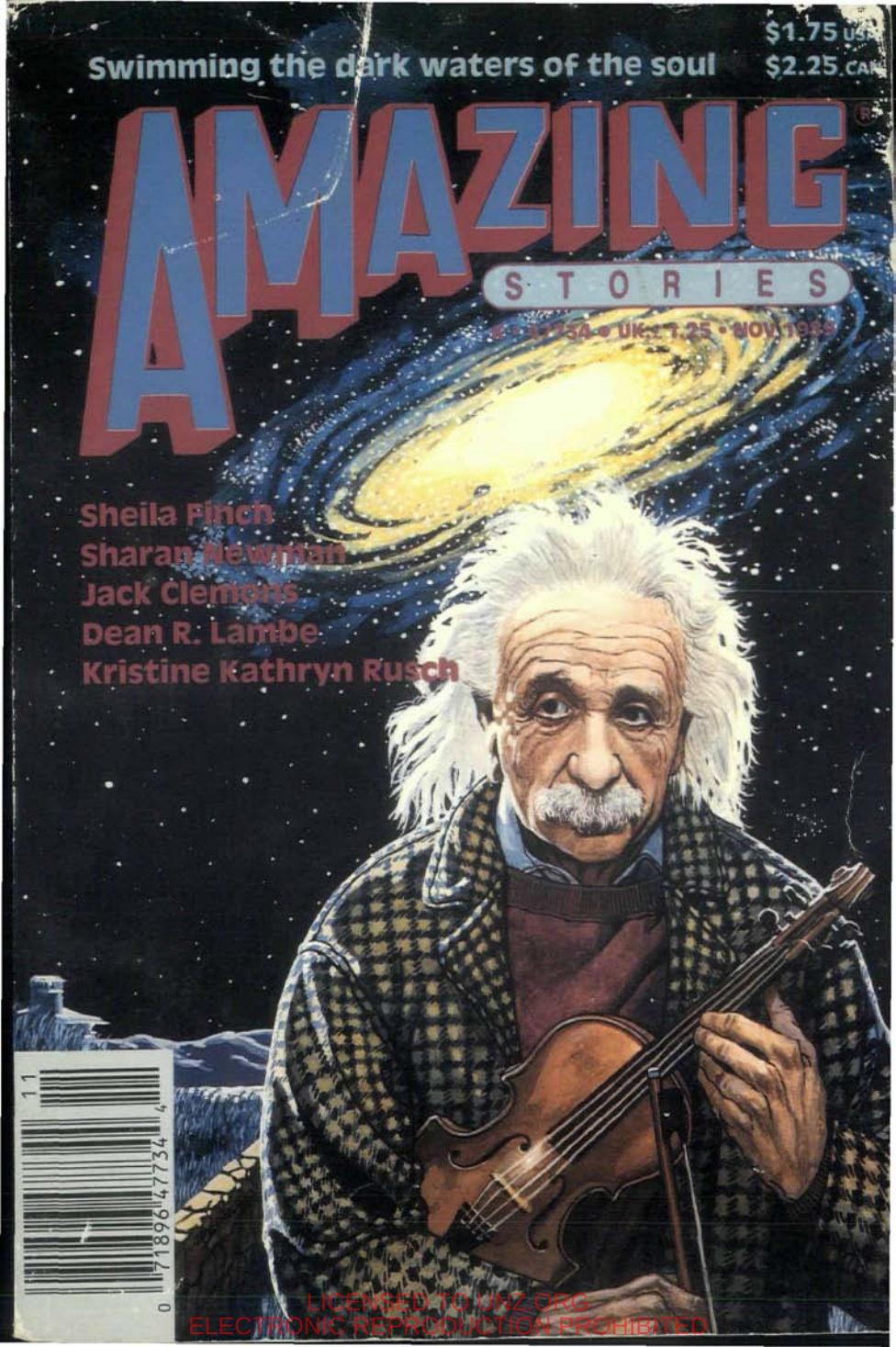
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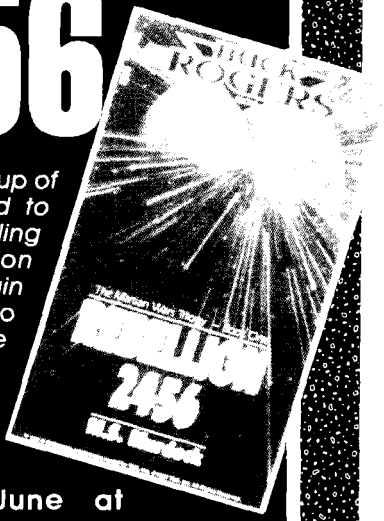


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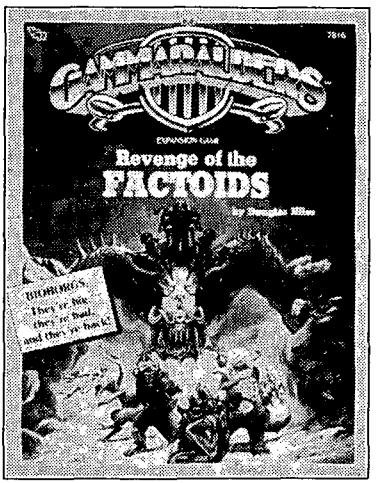
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FICTION



12



106



74

12 Sheila Finch
The Old Man and C

27 Forest Arthur Ormes
The Importance of the Buffalo

47 Sharan Newman
Woody & Me

54 Jack Clemons
Tool Dresser's Law

74 Kristine Kathryn Rusch
Fugue

88 Tais Teng
Green-ache

106 E. W. Smith
Under the Dog Star

COVER: Janet Aulisio for "The Old Man and C"

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NOVEMBER 1989

Volume 64
Number 4
(Whole Number 549)

NONFICTION

39 **Dean R. Lambe**
The Sin of Yin, the Clang of Yang

POETRY

11 **Sandra J. Lindow**
Red Pine, a Case Study

26 **Esther M. Friesner**
The Hobbyist

45 **Darrell Schweitzer**
Nuclear Spring

53 **Ruth Berman**
Dorothy and the Sequels

73 **John M. Ford**
SF Clichés IV: Space Mercenaries

158 **W. Gregory Stewart**
in re: digital

DEPARTMENTS

6 **Robert Silverberg**
Reflections

25 **Bruce Simpson**
B FEATURE

159 **The Readers**
Inflections

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Reflections

Robert Silverberg

A remarkable structure is now rising on Staten Island in New York Harbor, just a few miles southeast of the Statue of Liberty — an edifice that may very well serve as the archetypical metaphorical landmark of the late twentieth century.

It's a pyramid of garbage, 505 feet high.

The Great Pyramid of Khufu at Giza, which is now some 4,500 years old and has been considered one of the wonders of the world for most of that time, was 481 feet high when it was completed. (It's about 30 feet shorter now, because of erosion and because some of its stone blocks and limestone casings were plundered long ago for other uses.) The Pharaoh's tomb took twenty years to build, the Greek historian Herodotus informs us. It was made of a couple of million blocks of sandstone, and its weight is estimated at 5.8 million tons.

Which is nothing at all compared to the magnificence of the Fresh Kills Landfill, as the New York garbage pyramid is officially called. This modern wonder of the world, when it's complete in the year 2005, will contain 79.6 million cubic yards of trash, weighing *50* million tons. That well-known ape-around-town, King Kong (a frequent visitor to New York) would be able to lift Khufu's pyramid with just a little strain on his biceps, but Fresh Kills, coming in at close to nine times the weight of Khufu, will give even Mr. Kong a hard time.

Of course, the garbage pyramid won't be the tallest item in the New York area by a long shot. The Empire State Building, a familiar Kong stamping-ground, is 1,250 feet high, the World Trade Center is even taller, and there are dozens, maybe hundreds, of New York skyscrapers in the 500-foot-plus class. But other height comparisons are more instructive. The Fresh Kills Landfill will be taller than any mountain along the Atlantic seaboard between Maine and Florida. It'll be just 50 feet shorter than the Washington Monument, and 200 feet higher than its neighbor in the harbor, the Statue of Liberty.

What do New Yorkers say about this colossus now rising in their midst?

Not very much yet, apparently. At its tallest point just now it's only 130 feet high, and not yet visible from the streets of Manhattan. The real impact will come later. "People aren't aware yet of what a 500-foot sharply sided event will look like," says Thomas C. Jorling, the head of New York State's Department of Environmental Conservation. "The politics of the landfill will become more apparent when it passes 200 feet."

It sounds as though Mr. Jorling may be expecting a great public outcry of rage. But — knowing New York as I do — I wouldn't be surprised to see its people reacting with an outburst of civic pride instead. Not every city, after all, can generate 50 million tons of trash in a single generation and put it to so imposing a use. As New York City's Sanitation Commissioner, Bren-

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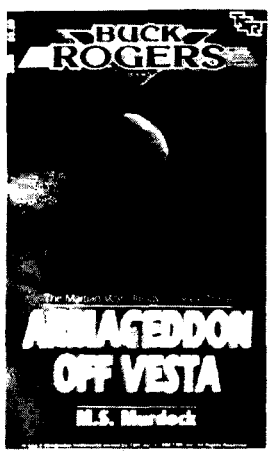
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dan Saxton, puts it, "As it gets taller, people will be more clearly reminded that this is of their own doing. This is something that has been made possible by the contributions of all New Yorkers."

Fresh Kills won't simply be a monstrous tapering artificial mountain, you understand. It's going to be a park.

The plan is to cover it with trees and build a two-lane road running to its summit. Already New York has spent upwards of $11 million for half a million shrubs and plants, and two thousand full-grown trees, which have been planted along the outskirts of the landfill to screen it from nearby residential neighborhoods. As the pyramid rises toward completion, the plantings will continue up and up the 40-degree grade. No doubt there'll be hiking trails there eventually, playgrounds (somewhat sloping ones), and even a botanic garden, perhaps. (Los Angeles, ever a pioneer in urban adventure, already has such a garden, and a very lovely one, sitting atop a garbage dump in the Palos Verdes region.)

Ah, you say. What about the smell? Doesn't decomposing garbage have a distinctive odor? Won't 79.6 million cubic feet of decomposing garbage have a *very* distinctive odor?

In a word, yes. The experts are working on it. So far what they're doing is choosing highly fragrant flowers to mask the stench. Petunias here, rotting fish over there — it might just work out, if they put in enough petunias. And the beauty part is that garbage eventually finishes decomposing, but a slendid pyramid is forever. Ask the Egyptians.

So the people of Staten Island (and of the rest of New York City, if the wind is blowing) may have to put up with a little unpleasantness for thirty or forty years. But after that they'll have one more magnificent tourist attraction to offer, and the rubes from Peoria will pay big bucks for a guided tour.

Those of us whose profession or hobby it is to peer into the future, though, have a few mild questions to ask about all this.

If New York City can generate enough garbage between now and the year 2005 (not so far away!) to build a pyramid out of it bigger than Khufu's, where are they going to put the garbage they produce between 2005 and 2025, and the crop they create from 2025 to 2040, and so on during all the succeeding generations? Do they envisage an ever-growing plantation of pyramids spreading across all of Staten Island? Will there be garbage wars as New Yorkers try to annex parts of New Jersey as sites for the pyramids of the twenty-first century?

Is there something else, perhaps, that they can do with the stuff besides pile it up in mounds 500 feet high?

I don't mean put it on barges and ship it to Arkansas or Puerto Rico, either. I mean recycle it — biodegrade it — burn it for electrical energy — *anything*, anything at all, rather than stash it in man-made mountains just across the harbor.

Garbage heaps are as old as humanity. Archaeologists seek them out gleefully at prehistoric sites, rooting around in Paleolithic kitchen-middens to discover what our ancestors had for dinner. But the increasing complexity of modern civilization has brought with it a startling increase in the volume of trash we have to cope with, as anyone who has ever tried to dispose of last month's twenty cubic feet of styrofoam peanuts from last month's three mail-order acquisitions can testify.

"Fresh Kills is the living, working

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proof that we throw away as much as we consume," Sanitation Commissioner Saxton observes. "Each New Yorker contributes a ton a year to that site."

It's something worth thinking about, and not just in New York, as that 500-foot sharply sided event continues to rise over there on Staten Island.



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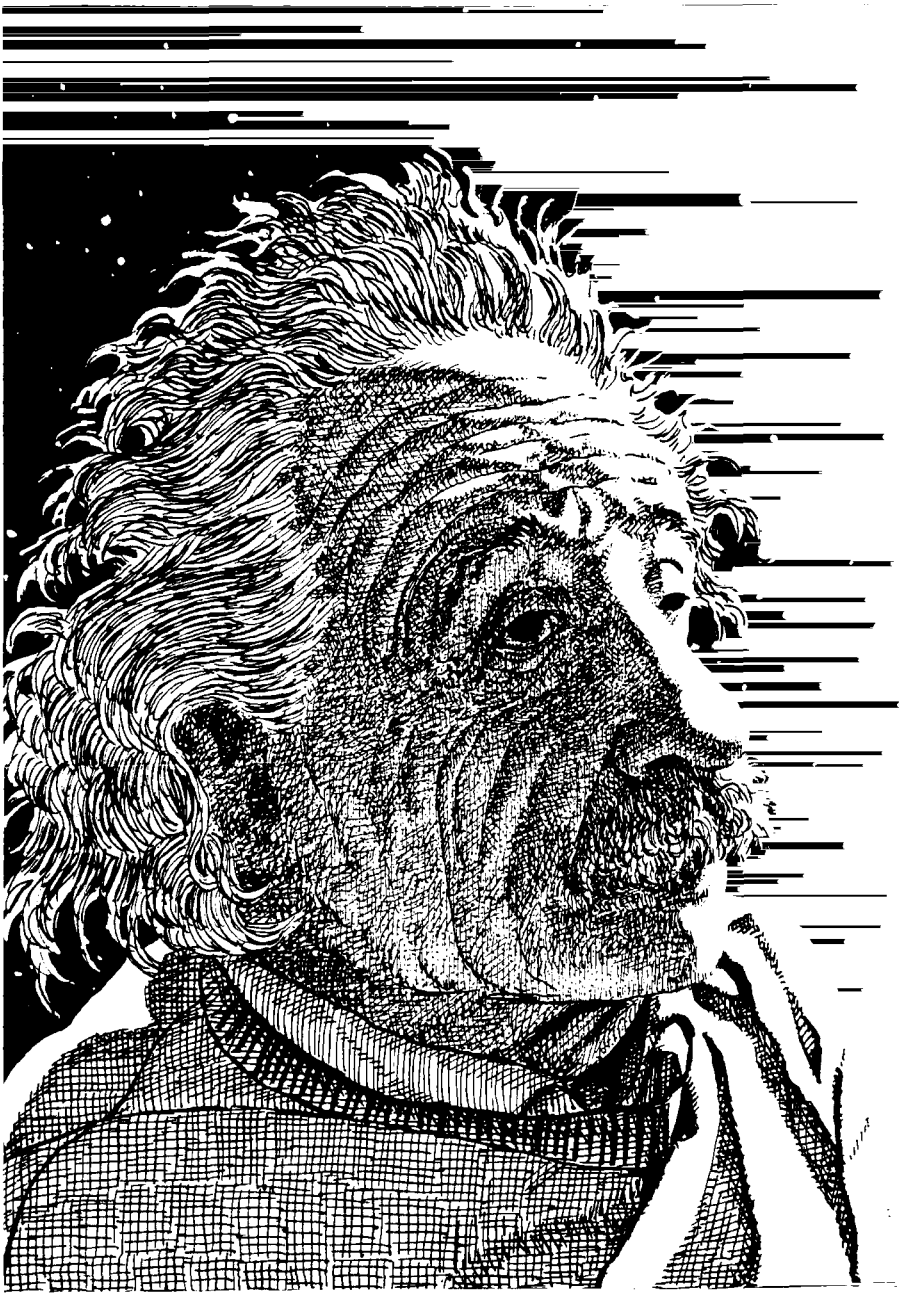
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RED PINE, A CASE STUDY

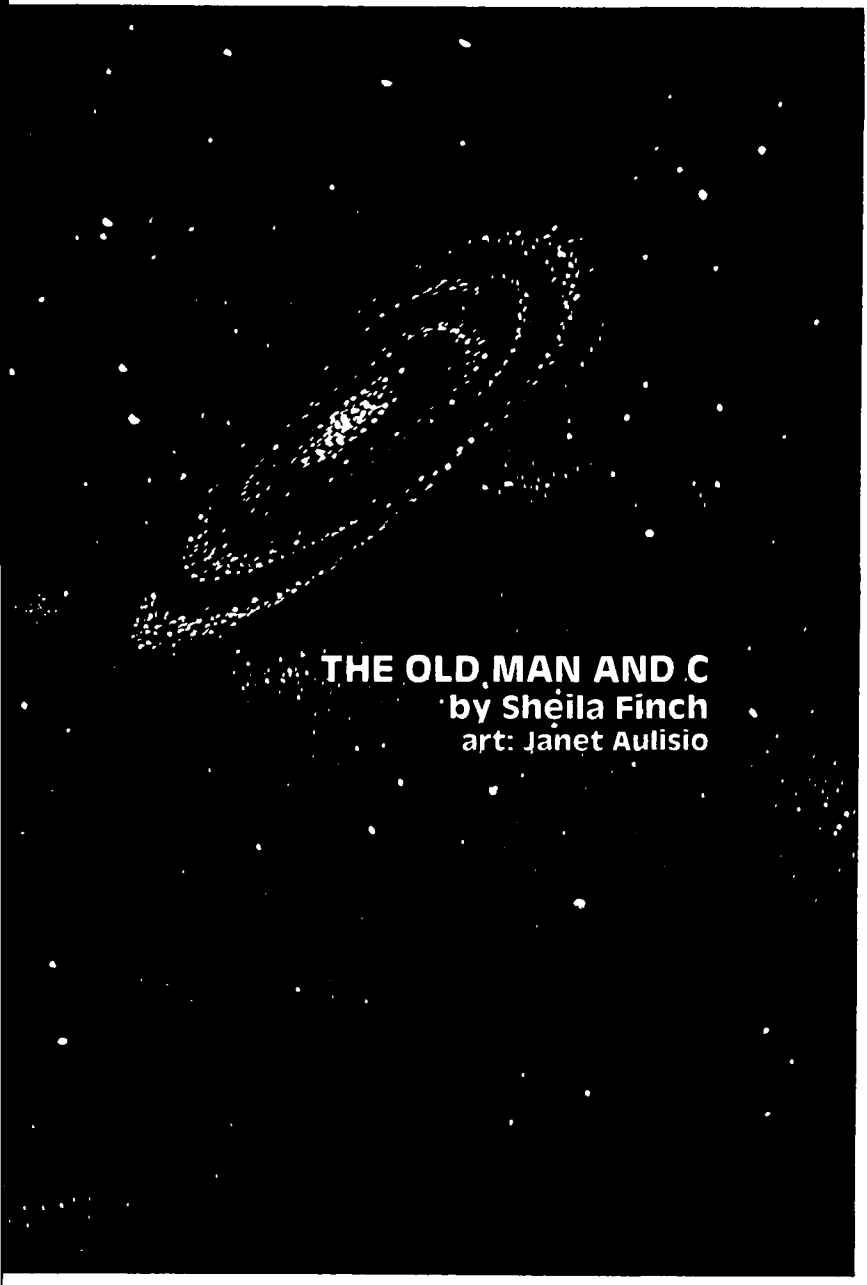
I saw him look to where the red pine
Grew, enticing,
Beyond the wire fence of the treatment center.
He turned and I saw obsidian eyes,
Narrow, search the room
As a hawk, confined, would search
The limits of his cage;
And I knew it wouldn't be long
Before he would be gone,
Over the hill, around the corner,
Down the street, where the wind called,
And there was gasoline to be
Inhaled deeply until the world bent,
Swam, and he became one
With the grass, the trees, the sky.
Then all the white man's ways would fall
Like too many tight clothes
And he would walk, loose-limbed, proud,
In a way his people had not done
In the cage of two hundred years.
I saw
And knew that nothing I said
Would make a difference.
Later, I saw him on the playground
Swinging so high he could see
To the Chippewa River,
So high that the swing
Was even with the metal bar;
And then when he could get no higher,
He let go,
Flew over the fence,
And was gone —
Down the hill, over the tracks,
Hitching a ride on a train
That rattled north,
Or so the reporters have said;
But I know different,
For just as he fell over the fence,
I saw a great brown bird rise against the sun
And fly
Toward the place where the treetops
Touched the clouds in the sky.

— Sandra J. Lindow

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Light sprang to the wall when his wife opened the casement window to let in a little breeze from the lake. It shattered, sparkling over bookshelves and wallpaper, as his young student's bow scraped across the E string and the fingers of her left hand searched for high C.

She still could not seem to get it right. The note must sing, not screech! He had shown Rosa over and over, patiently correcting her fingering, the pressure of the bow across the string, explaining to her how the sound was produced in the hope that if she understood perhaps she could improve. She was so brilliant in every other respect.

"*Kaffee,* Papa?" his wife whispered in his ear.

He shook his head.

"Don't lose sight of the time. Eddie comes this afternoon. And Lisl will want to go with her *Opa* on the boat!"

Rosa had progressed to the arabesque, a passage she played excellently, her fingers flying like the scintillating reflection of water on the wall.

His wife left him to his pupil and the music lesson, closing the music room door quietly behind her. He gazed at Rosa. Eyes closed, she bit her lower lip in concentration. Wisps of fair hair escaped from braids trailing over her shoulders. She was a good girl, the best student he had ever had. If she mastered this one note, she should easily take the gold medal — perhaps the last he would see a pupil take. She had more natural talent than any of his previous medalists.

But the other students in the competition, children who came from the wealthy suburbs of Zurich where they had *Waschmaschinen* and *Fernsehapparaten,* they could afford to spend all day practicing, whereas Rosa got up at first light and helped her father milk the cows. Time for the violin had to be sandwiched between farm chores and schoolwork. Now she was approaching sixteen; her father had begun to think of the day she would marry a solid farm lad and give him one less mouth to feed. This was her last chance, too. He had worked hard with Rosa, giving long lessons and extra lessons that her family had paid for with cream and eggs. Who could say if it would be enough?

Rosa finished the piece with a flourish, the notes sparkling almost visibly in the air between them.

"So, Herr Professor, are you pleased?" Triumph shining on her round face showed what answer she expected.

"I'm very pleased," he agreed.

"We're going to win the medal," she promised.

It was important to him that this little farm girl take the very last gold medal. Yet he knew he should not allow his own sense of self-worth to become bound to a pupil's performance in a competition. How had it hap-

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pened? When one is young, he thought, how many choices lie at one's fingertips? How many roads beckon the eager traveler? Time spreads out before the young man like a map of a marvelous sunlit country. He knows he can write symphonies, build castles, discover the secrets of the universe — which will it be? He does not know (for God is merciful) that the choice of one road shuts out the possibility of another. Who can guarantee which is right to take?

His mother had always wanted him to play the violin. And he had been an indifferent scholar in school.

"Herr Einstein?" Rosa said, her young face creased in a frown. "Aren't you well?"

He discovered that he was sweating and took out a linen handkerchief to mop his brow. "I'm well, Rosa. It's hot today, that's all. What else should we expect of July?"

"If I get my chores done early enough, my mother says I can take my little brothers swimming." She looked up at him, blue eyes innocent as infinity. "Do you wish me to play something else, Herr Professor?"

He patted her hand. "Enough for today, *Liebchen.* Enjoy the lake!"

And the light, he thought, the vast potential of the realms of light.

Rosa put the violin away in its case, gathered up her music, dropped him a hasty curtsy, and scurried from the room. The dancing light, fragmented by her departure, gathered itself together again, settling back on the walls and the Turkish rug and the dark wood of the grand piano.

The day's post lay on the floor by the armchair under the open window where he had left it at the beginning of Rosa's lesson. Sunshine fell on the fat pile, a correspondence he carried on with old friends, poets, pacifists, and Zionists, people he had met all over Europe when he had still been touring with the orchestra. They sent letters full of music and philosophy and grand theory, wonderful talk. It was like a rich, festive meal that today he did not feel like eating. He set most of the letters aside, unopened. There had been a time when he had shared his friends' sense of the universe in the palm of his hand, a gift of a benign God who revealed His existence in the harmony of His creation.

He shook his head mutely. It was a young man's belief. The world had fought two terrible wars since then. Now it was enough to sit quietly and look at what had become of the promises.

He was so tired today.

One letter was from his widowed cousin Elsa, full of news about her daughters, no doubt; he had always liked Elsa. He tore the stamps off the envelope carefully, saving them for his granddaughter, Lisl.

"Papa?" His wife appeared in the doorway, her hands still floury from making *Dampfnudeln.* "Are you coming to lunch?"

"Ah, Millie," he said. "I'm getting old."

"Seventy-five isn't old!"

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"And what have I accomplished?"

Millie spread her arms wide. "This house — two fine sons — your sailboat down there on the lake — your pupils — perhaps Rosa gets the gold this year. How many will that make for you? — And you ask what you've accomplished?"

He was silent, looking at the shimmering light from the lake that shot its arrows into his soul.

"Besides," his wife said, "Lisl adores you. That must be worth something?"

But the sense there might have been more gnawed at him.

Later, with his son and granddaughter, he took the sailboat far out on Lake Zurich, tilting gently in a mild breeze and grand weather, sailing under the lee of slopes covered with ripening vineyards, presided over by the hump of the Albishorn.

Millie was right, he thought, all the tiny joys had to add up to something.

"I picked up a translation of a new thing that came out last year from this American writer, Hemingway," Eddie said, as Lisl trailed fingers in the cold, clear water, shattering the drowned light in its depths into diamond fragments. "It's about an old man fishing, and sharks."

"I don't like to fish."

"You'd like this story!"

He gazed at his younger son, a banker, already thickening into comfortable middle age. "I don't have as much time to read as you, apparently."

"Nonsense! You read the wrong things — about wars and terrible things like that. You should read fiction."

"So many wars. Where will it all end?"

"Pfft!" Eddie made a derisive sound. "These Asians are all alike. The Koreans will run out of steam just as the Japanese did in 1947. You'll see. The Americans hate to do anything violent. They'll make another treaty."

"Opa," Lisl interrupted, hanging over the low side of the boat, brown hair trailing through sun-spangled water. "Are there sharks in this lake? May I go swimming?"

"Careful!" Eddie warned. "You'll fall in fully clothed, and then your grandmother will scold!"

The sun's slanting radiance scattered from the child's flowing hair. He stared at it, fascinated. The play of light had always obsessed him.

"Opa?" Lisl urged.

"A man should leave a mark," he said, watching the flash and dazzle in the lake. "It's not enough just to have lived."

"Exactly the point of the Hemingway story I referred to!" his son said with obvious satisfaction. "I took the liberty of putting my copy on your desk, Papa."

The child began to cry.

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Venus, the evening star, was already burning in the western sky. They heeled over and brought the sailboat swooping back to the dock.

The map does not indicate which is the best road, only that more than one possibility exists.

One afternoon many years ago (perhaps early May, for he remembered the cuckoo's melancholy call outside the open window) he had been at his desk in the patent office in Bern. Splinters of sunlight fell through green branches onto the papers he was reading. The work was sterile, soul-killing. He lived for the evenings when the streetlamps were lit; then he walked under pale yellow flowers of the linden trees to the back room of a small *Gasthaus*. There, he joined a string quartet, exploring their way across Beethoven's stark territory, the rich jungles of Brahms, the tidy gardens of Johann Sebastian Bach. He had just recently graduated from the Polytechnic Academy, where he'd studied mathematics. But music had proved to be his lorelei.

This particular day, he remembered, he had trouble chaining his mind to the endless march of dull papers across his desk, while outside the marvelous vernal light called to him. Instead, he played with numbers (the abstract language of music, he had always thought) that combined and recombined in mysterious ways, numbers like the swarming stars that dazzled overhead in the clear Alpine night.

"Ho, Jew-boy!" The supervisor, a spindly little man with a receding hairline who had taken an instant dislike to the new employee, stopped by his desk.

He hastily slid a pile of half-finished forms over the mathematical doodlings. The supervisor leered over the desk, hoping to catch him in blatant error so there would be cause to fire him.

"Is the report ready, young genius? Or have you been too busy to bother?"

"I'll have it done on time."

"You certainly will — or you'll look elsewhere for employment!"

He was not born to work behind a desk, filling out forms, following someone else's orders. But he also was not capable of ignoring a challenge. For two hours he worked without stopping till the report was done, far more thoroughly than even the thin supervisor had a right to expect.

That evening at music practice, a warm spring breeze blowing, full of starshine and promises, he received his first request to give tuition on the violin to the child of the *Gasthaus* keeper.

The next morning he gave notice at the patent office.

Rosa worked the bow smoothly across her instrument, moving through the difficult passage that led inexorably up the scale to high C, her nemesis. He leaned back in the armchair, eyes closed, evaluating, trying to hear the Rachmaninoff the way the judges would. Rain spattered the closed window,

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and Millie had lit the lamps in the middle of the afternoon. One week to go, he thought. One week to make a mark, to change the path of the stars that told man's fate, to mold the universe to one old man's will.

He was tired all the time now. The Earth under his feet tugged at him, bending him out of shape.

Then she faltered once again on the high note, and he leaped up from his chair, forgetful of stiff joints.

"No! No! No!" He seized the instrument from her hands. "What have I told you? You aren't milking cows here! You must glide up the notes like a fish swimming in a river! Like this."

He ran the bow smoothly up and down the scale, arthritic fingers for once remembering how they had moved in their youth when he had been the soloist with the orchestra in Paris and Vienna and at the Albert Hall.

Rosa lowered blond lashes over her ruddy cheeks, and he caught the gleam of tears in the glow of the lamps.

He relented. "All right now. We've worked hard enough for one lesson. Perhaps it'll go better tomorrow, or the next day."

"I'm sorry, Herr Professor. I don't wish to let you down."

But perhaps he had let himself down? Perhaps if he had stayed longer in the patent office, used the time to think about numbers?

"Let me try it again," she pleaded. "I *will* get it right!"

He gave her back the violin, thinking about possibilities and life that had a habit of squeezing them down.

His Uncle Jakob had urged something else, but Mama had her heart set on music. And music had been good to him, he could not deny that. He had moved back to Zurich, married his university sweetheart, and raised two young sons in relative comfort. In his orchestra days, he had seen something of the world. He had books and music and friends around the globe who wrote to him and came to visit. He had had good students — more silvers and bronzes than any other teacher in the canton, and a respectable number of golds. One had even gone on to world-class competition — he remembered a brief, breathtaking visit to New York.

And now he was at home with the lake and the boat and the crisp Alpine light sculpting the mountains.

If he had been someone like Van Gogh, he would have painted that light. Sometimes he thought about the incandescent heart of distant galaxies, spewing brightness through the universe to break at last under its own weight on the shores of Lake Zurich. It made his heart ache to think of it.

Rosa tried the passage again. This time he did not have to wince as she reached high C.

That evening, drinking his coffee with whipped cream and chocolate, sitting beside Millie, hand in hand on the balcony, watching the moon come and go in the scudding clouds over the lake, he thought about the mystery of

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roads where one made decisions in darkness.

"Do you never wonder, Millie, if your life might have been different?"

"How so, different?" she asked suspiciously.

"Do you never entertain the idea that perhaps you might have done something else with your time, something you might have been *better* at?"

"No," Millie said.

He sighed. "We could have traveled. We could have seen more of America."

"We could have had problems and divorced!" she said sourly.

He patted her hand. "Never."

The ache persisted, nevertheless.

The next morning, Hans Albert telephoned from Berlin, where he was a professor of physics.

"Have you read the newspaper, Papa?"

Behind the telephone in the hall, the wallpaper — Millie's favorite pattern, clumps of creamy roses festooned with little pink ribbons — glowed in warm sunshine. He stared, imagining the artist making the very first drawing from a real vase of roses, the blooms illuminated by a ray of sunlight falling like a benediction on the studio. In some sense, it was all happening now: the painter, the roses blooming in the garden before somebody cut them, the old violin teacher gazing at wallpaper. The past, like the future, was only a stubborn linguistic illusion.

"Papa?"

"Ah. What should I have read?"

"The war, of course! Don't you always read about the war in Korea?"

Yes, the war. The strangeness of the place-names, *Seoul, Pyongyang, Pusan.* And the stupidity of young boys killing other young boys in jungles and rice paddies where light slanted through palm trees and bamboo thickets, light that had crossed the darkness of space from a distant star to illuminate a scene for painters.

"They're still fighting?"

"Papa!" Then another idea seemed to occur to his son. "Are you feeling well?"

"You're going to tell me that the American airplanes dropped a most peculiar bomb on a Korean town with a name as singular as roses. Isn't this so?"

"Yes — but, roses? Anyway, let me tell you about this weapon, Papa! A great advance — the future beckoning! — You see what they've proved? A particle of matter can be converted into enormous outbursts of energy. This is something we've been working on here at the university, splitting uranium atoms."

"Light," he said. "It travels so fast! No time at all, really, from our point of view."

Hans Albert was silent. After a while he said casually, "Is Mama there?

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Let me speak to her."

The afternoon was quite warm, but Millie insisted he wear his hat anyway. He had the impression if he had argued, she would have dragged out muffler and gloves too. *Stop at the barber's on your way,* she had ordered. *Your hair is all over the place again!*

He descended the narrow street that took him from his house, built during Zwingli's Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, to the violin-maker's shop on Bahnhofstrasse in the center of the modern tourist district. Strange, the road that unwound in time from one to the other, he thought, and he too trudging down it. A Mercedes-Benz with German license plates blared at him as he stepped off a curb without looking. A donkey cart clopped by in the opposite direction, its driver wearing a peasant smock that Zwingli might have recognized. There was no such thing as past or future, he saw. It all happened at once in the wonderful, brimming light. He felt the weight of it, soft as petals on his face and hands.

The shop was cool and dim inside until his eyes adjusted. Sawdust muffled his footsteps. His nose filled with the scent of pine and ebony, maple and resin. Unstrung instruments hung on the wall like dreaming angels, waiting to wake and sing. He would not — could not — deny he loved music. He ran his fingers over wood like satin and velvet.

"Stradivari's design remains the standard of excellence, even today."

He glanced up at the speaker, a pale, stooped young man who carried on his father's and grandfather's business of making some of the best violins in Europe.

"That's my latest copy you're holding."

The young man took the instrument from his hands, tightened pegs, plucked strings, then took a bow and drew from the instrument a cascade of sound so rich it was like listening to a river of radiance pour down from the sky.

"High C," he said. "Let me hear it."

The young man demonstrated a pure, singing note.

He nodded. "Ah. And it lies easily under the fingers?"

"Very much so," the young man agreed. "But why does that concern you, my friend, expert musician that you are?"

"I have a student with a great deal of talent and a small hand."

The instrument maker glanced quizzically at him. They were, after all, speaking of violins not pianos.

"And a present might give her the confidence she needs to take the gold."

"I see." The young man laid the violin in its case and closed the lid. "On your account?"

"On my account, thank you."

And if it had not been music, he thought as he was leaving the shop, his gift in his hand, what then? What grand enterprise would have filled his life?

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Whatever might have been, surely it would have been sufficient. God was subtle, but He was not malicious.

One time, when he had been perhaps eleven or twelve, there had been a conversation around the kitchen table in his parents' home in Munich. An early snow sifted down outside, and his mother had pulled heavy velvet curtains across the windows. In his memory, the kitchen was hazy with blue-grey smoke from his uncle's pipe, like a stage scene painted on gauze.

"Another poor report!" his father said, his hand over his eyes as if the mellow amber glow of the table lamp was too much for him. "I don't see why you don't just leave school now and come and join your uncle and me in the factory, instead of wasting your time and my money in the classroom."

"It was just low marks in history and geography, Hermann!" his mother pointed out. She stood with his father's *bierkrug* in her hand, on the way to the cellar to refill it. "It said nothing about other subjects."

"Ah, leave the boy alone," Uncle Jakob counseled. "He's a slow learner, but he's capable of good things."

"You say so?" his father asked. "Well, I don't see it."

A small fire chuckled to itself behind the glass doors of the potbellied stove; it was not yet cold enough in the room to open the doors.

"Sometimes . . ." he began hesitantly, not because he was afraid of his father but because he was not sure himself what he wanted to say. "Sometimes I think there's some great work for me to do."

His father forked up a slice of cold meat and added it to a hunk of dark bread and cheese he had been preparing before the subject of young Albert's bad marks came up. "Electrical engineering is great work, lad! It's the future."

"He's good at mathematics, a natural," Uncle Jakob said thoughtfully. "Too good to be just an engineer, like you and me, Hermann."

"Music is like mathematics, isn't it?" his mother asked, coming back into the room with a full krug. Foam leaked out from under the pewter lid.

"Then let him be a civil servant!" his father said. "But this schooling is a waste."

"There's something I have to do," he insisted. "I think there's a plan to my life. A riddle I have to solve —"

"So good at words, and yet he can't pass his composition test!" his father mocked.

His mother smoothed his hair — even as a young boy it had been unruly. "There's always more than one way, *Liebchen.*"

"I think —"

"Life's a great game of chance," Uncle Jakob said. He leaned back from the table and re-lit his pipe. "An uncertain ride on a merry-go-round at the Oktoberfest!"

"But Uncle, that's like saying God is a gambler, throwing the dice for our

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lives —"

"The dice tell me you are no good in school!" his father roared. "I don't need God to advise me not to spend more money on a poor scholar!"

His mother pulled him to her, pressing his face against her starched apron. "Don't worry, *Liebchen.* I have money for music lessons. My money. Neither God nor your father shall have any say in how I spend it. I'll buy you a new violin."

"Come, Papa. You haven't even tasted your champagne!"

Millie linked her arm through his and drew him through the crowded living room, past the neighbors, the friends from their musical circle, the rabbi and the priest of the local Catholic church deep in a discussion of the world soccer cup, past his sons who were arguing over the Korean bomb.

"This atom they've split has unleashed a terrible demon in our world!" Eddie said.

Hans Albert had made the trip unexpectedly from Berlin on the *Schnellzug.* "You don't understand. When the governments of the world are aware of the power of the atom, they'll finally make peace!"

He was not fooled. One more gold medal was hardly cause enough for his oldest son's visit. They worried about his health. Strange, for he did not worry about it himself.

Rosa, flushed and shining in a new dress, stood by the refreshment table that Millie and the housekeeper had worked all afternoon to set up with Millie's heirloom silver and best china. The gold medal flamed like a sun on Rosa's chest. Her parents stood with her, thick-bodied, slow-thinking. They were good people from the farm, not quite sure they understood why all these elegant folk in silk and velvet and glittering rings had come in taxis to kiss their little Rosa on both cheeks and shake her father's hand. The future unfolded before them like a rose petal uncurling, and they did not have the wit to know it.

"Herr Einstein," Rosa called. "Thank you!"

She blew him a kiss with her fingertips that had so flawlessly reached high C. Then she turned to the young man beside her — a cousin, he knew, a farm lad — and tucked the hand with the gifted fingers in his.

Millie herded her husband to an armchair from which he could see everybody in the room. He sank into it, feeling for a moment like the apple whose falling to Earth had demonstrated gravity. Lisl promptly climbed on his lap, spilling champagne over the new grey trousers Millie had made him wear. His daughter-in-law retrieved the child and took her away to bed; her own cheeks were as rosy from champagne as the child's were from summer sun. Across the room, he caught sight of his oldest grandchild, a serious boy, much too old now to sit on a grandparent's knee. He showed signs of following his uncle into the sciences.

Hans Albert, still glowering from the argument with his brother, came to

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sit in the chair beside him.

"Grand theories are in the air now," Hans Albert said. "Wonderful ideas about extending the Poincaré theory of dynamics to include gravitation. But some fools oppose the work."

"Ah. Who invents this?"

"Papa, physicists don't *invent*. They're not engineers. They propose theories and test them. Anyway, the ideas come from some Americans, Dyson and Feynman. And from our Heisenberg too, of course."

"Light," he said, gazing at the warm play of candlelight on silver.

Hans Albert nodded impatiently. "Of course! The role of light, following an innate curve made by matter, that's in the theory. And space and time too, threaded together and warped by matter. The equations describing this reduce to Newton's familiar prescriptions in the limit of essentially flat geometries. That's what's so exciting. I wish I could make you understand! You see —"

"How heavy it is."

"What is?" His son frowned at the interruption.

"Each ray as subtle as a rose petal," he said dreamily, "bending down to the Earth."

"Something like that," the younger man said carefully.

"And everywhere it bends. If we go far enough away, does the light streaming out from the stars seem to curve?"

"Well, I don't —"

"Even to the end of things? Mustn't light bend then, at least?"

Hans Albert stared at him. "No disrespect, Papa, but you're certainly not a physicist!"

When Millie's back was turned, he slipped out of the crowded room.

The balcony was dark and empty, and the air rising off the lake was fresh. Overhead, a huge tapestry of stars blazed, a panoply of light streaking outward to the far horizons of the universe. It was a time to see not just backwards but forwards too. Someday, he thought, man would follow the elusive light of the stars, sailing out into the far reaches of space. Hans Albert could have told him how this would be done, but he already knew the truth of it in his heart.

He had the sense again tonight of endings, of a wave that had traveled so far finally curving on a distant shore. So be it. He was ready for it; there were few things to regret. All in all, it had been a good life.

Rosa had reached her C.

And yet — and yet.

The book Eddie had left for him was wrong in one respect. The sharks who snatch away the victory were not external. They swam in the dark waters of the soul. The trick was not to let them.

He gazed up into the sky at the great gorgeous light. ❁

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THE LITERARY CAREER OF SHEILA FINCH
Current Directions . . .

TO: MS. MUSE
P.O. BOX
SCHENECTADY

Waiting for the muse to fly in the window makes about as much sense for a writer as trying to find Harlan Ellison's secret source of ideas. Stories begin anywhere and everywhere. But can you get a serious story from a trivial beginning?

I teach fiction writing at El Camino College in California, and I frequently employ creativity exercises designed to prod reluctant or blocked talents into action. Sometimes I manage to teach myself something at the same time. One popular exercise is called "Fractured Titles." You can guess how it goes: take a well-known title from books or the media, and turn it around; see what it suggests.

One slow day, I was writing in my notebook and I did several fractured titles for fun; one of them was Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea.* What would a story about C be like? Well, obviously, C stands for the speed of light. That suggested Albert Einstein at the end of his life. I'd always wanted to write a story about Einstein, one of the gentlest giants of our time.

I didn't have the opportunity then to speculate further, but a few weeks later Greg Benford asked me if I'd like to consider submitting an alternate-world story for an anthology he was preparing — "what if the great ones weren't" type of thing. I thought of my fractured title. C is also a musical note, and I remembered Einstein had played the violin. A little research into his biography yielded the rest of the story.

It was certainly a playful beginning, yet I think the story itself is not playful but bittersweet. The muse, I've discovered, likes to visit when you've already started without her. I realized after it was written that I had also been exploring my own concern that I not arrive on my deathbed realizing ("seeing") I've wasted my potential, not done the things with my life that I could have. So a serious story grew consciously and unconsciously out of what was basically a pun.

Sure beats sending your money to Schenectady.

. . . and Past Achievements

"Darkness Comes Rattling," short story. *Amazing Stories:* July 1983.

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Infinity's Web. Bantam Books, 1985. Winner of the Compton Crook Award for the best novel, 1986.

Triad. Bantam Books, 1986.

The Garden of the Shaped. Bantam Books, 1987.

"Hitchhiker," short story. *Amazing Stories:* September 1987.

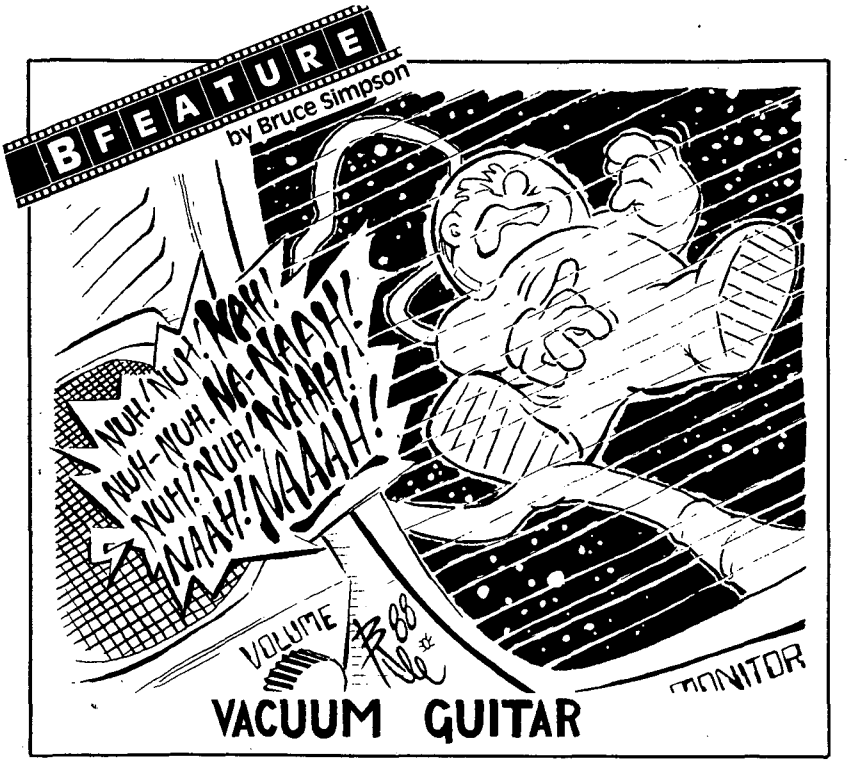
"Babel Interface," short story. *Amazing Stories:* May 1988.

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Shaper's Legacy. Bantam Books, 1989.

"Ceremony after a Raid," short story. *Amazing Stories:* July 1989.

Shaping the Dawn. Bantam Books, 1989.



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THE HOBBYIST

There's horrible clutter in Winifred's room.
I won't say wherefore and I won't say with whom
Lies the blame, but it's certainly safe to assume
No wise man will walk into Winifred's room.

There's horrible clutter in Winifred's room.
The shroud hangs half-raveled while still on the loom.
If the girl would but *finish* it, I'd not presume
To upbraid all the clutter in Winifred's room.

There's horrible clutter in Winifred's room.
The dust lies in heaps, she will *not* use a broom,
And the skull she trucked home from dear Grandfather's tomb
Oversees the sad state of our Winifred's room.

There's horrible clutter in Winifred's room.
The mummy she *begged* for in far-off Khartoum
I fear as a plaything has quite lost its bloom
From standing neglected in Winifred's room.

There's horrible clutter in Winifred's room.
The dead alligator's reptilian gloom
Is rapidly adding its unique perfume
To the piquing miasma in Winifred's room.

There's horrible clutter in Winifred's room.
We can't pay the servants enough to exhume
The original furnishings. Cobwebs consume
The dear teddies and dollies in Winifred's room.

There's horrible clutter in Winifred's room.
I've looked for her Step-Pappa, tried to resume
Talk of *training* the child — but I've not seen my groom
Since last Whitsun when he entered Winifred's room.

— Esther M. Friesner

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THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BUFFALO

by Forest Arthur Ormes
art: Janet Aulisio

The author works on the near west side of Chicago's ghetto as a counselor to alcoholics, drug addicts, and the emotionally disturbed. During his spare time, he writes short fiction, his most current project being a series of short stories entitled "The Chicken Coop Diaries." His fiction has appeared in the North Dakota Quarterly *and* Amazing® Stories *("Came Up Running," November 1986).*

She looked up at the digital sign on the wall and read:

UNIONVILLE.

Four hundred years of American history passed before her as she watched the monorail quickly pick up speed and vanish down the single, electromagnetic track.

The locker where she slid her suitcase snapped securely shut. Gertrude Raspert glanced at the two envelopes in her purse before placing the plastic computerized locker card inside and clasping her purse closed. She thought of the days before the monorails and how, as a girl, she used to stand outside her house and listen for the trains to whistle, then run down to the tracks and wave at the engineers as their giant engines rumbled passed carrying a load of freight cars stretching as far back as the eye could see.

Just like the buffalo, she thought. And now, like the buffalo, the trains were gone.

"Gone!" she hollered, and then quickly looked around to see if anyone was in the station who might hear.

The automated station contained an uncomfortable, mechanical-like buzz. From somewhere on the ceiling above, a red light briefly brightened, then dimmed. Except for the rotating security camera, not one thing moved.

For a sixty-five-year-old woman alone, like herself, such outbursts could be dangerous. If she were still working, and still living in her old neighborhood in the city, a neighbor might report her behavior to the metropolitan police forces, who in turn would investigate and probably refer her to the local Employee Assistance Program. The local EAP would advise her employer that they had suggested a minimum of one year of psychotherapy. When the EAP offered their services, the given employee was unable to refuse and remain an employee even if she was a civil servant with tenure. But now, without a job, and a stranger, traveling, Gertrude Raspert felt . . . well, free. Free to bellow out anything, anywhere she wanted.

"There is a better word," she calmly said out loud.

Again, instinctively, she looked around.

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"Extinct," she pronounced.

Repeat it, she told herself. We must not forget. The words and the memories must be kept alive.

"Extinct," she repeated, but so softly that she could hardly hear herself above the droning, electric noise of the monorail station.

Yes, extinct was a more accurate word than gone. When something is gone, it sometimes returns. When something becomes extinct, it never returns. Never!

Extinct. She had used the same word in school when teaching her history students about the buffalo.

"The decline and disappearance of the American buffalo," she used to begin.

"We already know all about the buffalo," one of the boys would interrupt. "Tell us about the battles. Custer, Little Big Horn, Crazy Horse . . ."

"The American buffalo," she would persist. "There used to be thousands. And now . . . slaughtered. Gone. Unbelievable, but almost extinct."

"Slaughtered! That's it!" another boy would exclaim. "Now what about the battles."

"The decline and disappearance of the American buffalo," she would begin again. "A way of life. Gone. Unbelievable, but . . ."

But that had been before classroom teachers like Gertrude Raspert had become obsolete.

"Extinct!" she hollered.

And again, above her somewhere from the ceiling, a red light brightened. Gertrude Raspert's hand went involuntarily over her mouth as she hurried toward the sliding exit doors of the monorail station.

It was a short walk to the main section of town. Gertrude Raspert stopped to read the feature set across the paint-worn marquis of an old theater —

OLD-FASHIONED STRIPTEASE
WITH GENUINE LIVE MUSIC

— then lowered her gaze to the names above each photograph that lined the theater's soot-stained brick wall.

"Tina, Ruby, Lisa, and Lee," she read.

Her throat tightened as she allowed her focus to fall upon a fifth, smaller-sized photograph that, like the others, was black and white, glass-contained, and old. She read:

Now Performing
Live on the Piano
Bernie Raspert.

The curtains to the ticket booth were drawn, so she opened the theater door and entered.

A medium-sized woman wearing jeans and a sweat shirt stood behind the refreshment stand.

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"Last show's half-over, lady," the woman said to her.

"I came to see Mr. Raspert," Gertrude answered.

"I'm the owner here. Bernie works for me. What do you want with him?"

"My name is Gertrude Raspert," she answered.

The woman's look changed from suspicion to recognition.

"Bernie told me you'd be comin' to meet him."

She gave Gertrude another head-to-foot inspection, then nodded her approval.

"Show'll be finished in half an hour. He'll be comin' out the side door" — she motioned toward a door marked PRIVATE. "Go on inside 'n see the rest of the show, if you want."

Gertrude looked hesitatingly at the two doors that led to the inside of the theater.

"My patrons won't bother you . . . if that's what you're afraid of," the woman said.

"That's not —"

"This ain't one of those dirty places, ma'am. This is an old-fashioned house presenting the old-fashioned art of striptease. We even got a comedy act. Show's free to you if you care to see it."

"Well thank you very much," Gertrude answered.

"Any seat open in the house," the owner said as Gertrude opened the door and walked inside.

When her eyes became accustomed to the darkness, the backs of a hundred different male heads appeared in front of her. Gertrude could hear the beat of piano keys as she turned around, passed through the doors and out into the lobby where, to her relief, the owner had her back turned cleaning out the popcorn machine and didn't seem to notice Gertrude's retreat.

Gertrude was sitting on the divan, waiting, when the male patrons began exiting from the two doors and slowly making their way out into the street. After the last patron had departed, Bernie Raspert came out the side door. When he saw Gertrude, he stopped. Then he came over and she stood up and they both held each other and continued holding each other until the owner came out from behind the refreshment stand, coughed, and entered the theater auditorium.

Gertrude stepped back and smiled up at him: "You look awfully good . . . Bernard," she said.

He ran his long, smooth fingers through his thick, dyed-black hair and stared back at her.

"How have you been?" she asked.

"Pretty good, Gertie," he answered.

He looked around at the lobby's dirty walls, then down at its threadbare rug.

"I'm ready to get out of this place. That's certain."

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"In your letter you said you had a definite job offered to you. Where, in these days, would they employ, permanent and full-time —"

"— a two-bit piano player with arthritic fingers?"

"A quality musician with forty years' experience," she shot back.

As if still getting accustomed to the sight of her, he paused and looked her up and down before speaking.

"It's the time, Gertie. Folks don't care about live piano . . . live anything anymore," he said. "Money's tight. Jobs are tight. People are tight. Times are tight. And the thing is . . . people live in their times. I have to adjust to those times."

"You spoke the same way when . . . we were together. How did you say it? 'Any . . . gig. Anywhere. As long as it means playing piano.' "

"Gig," he pronounced musingly. "I haven't used that word . . . in years. You always had a good memory for certain words, Gertie. 'Certain . . . significant words,' you used to say. You told me it was part of being a good teacher."

"It still is," she answered.

She examined the features of his face for age: the sharp, protruding cheeks, the straight nose and diminished chin that had always given him an unfinished handsomeness that, as a young woman, she had found irresistible. It was beneath his chin where the skin had begun to sag.

"You're the same Gertie. Older, but the same. Teaching," he uttered. "You used to tell me it was even more important then being a teacher. Teaching. Teaching came before anything. Even me."

She stared again at his thick, dyed-black hair.

"Let's not argue over the past, Bernard. Please."

Bernard lowered his head, then raised it with a smile.

"I'm fast becoming a novelty, Gertie!" he exclaimed. "A live flesh-and-blood professional piano player! That's what they want. And willing to pay to get one."

"They?"

"The permanent world exposition, Gertie. I've signed a contract with them for five years. Five working years, Gertie! Imagine that! Five full working years beginning next month."

"You didn't . . . tell me . . . in your letter."

"I wanted to surprise you, Gertie. At least one of us has gotten a break. Just four more weeks of this," he said, and again looked around at the stained walls of the lobby and its threadbare rug. "And then . . . They want people to see what it used to be like back when you and I were young. It's like I've suddenly gone up in value, as if I'm like . . . like —"

"— the buffalo," she finished.

"Yes, that's it! Just like the buffalo! All kept up and fed and cared for because —"

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"— because of what they did to the buffalo, Bernard."

His smile vanished.

"There she is. Clever, vicious Gertie. I almost forgot."

He raised his head with a sigh and looked down into her eyes.

"I got your letter, Gertie. I'm sorry. You did the best you could. They displaced you — booted you aside once — and you adjusted. This second time . . . there was nothing — absolutely nothing — you could do about it. Don't turn your bitterness on me, Gertie. I don't deserve that."

He paused.

"I thought . . . maybe you could be happy I got a break. That you could step outside your bitterness — just for a minute — and be happy for me."

"I am happy for you, Bernard. And I am . . . now . . . no longer bitter about what they've done."

"I don't believe you."

She stared over at a solitary box of popcorn on the counter of the refreshment stand, then turned to stare directly into his eyes.

"Your job . . . your contract . . . that means the west coast?"

"Nice climate there. All year round it's a nice climate."

Now he stared back at her. She could see his eyes grow sad and gentle — she could see he was lonely.

"You could come with me, Gertie," he said. "We are still . . . legally married."

"I know," she answered. "It's funny. I was going to ask you to come with me. Isn't that funny? Isn't that so very funny?"

"With you! Where! To do what! So both of us can sweep floors? Two times they've pushed their little buttons and . . . sssssst . . . your whole profession vanished. At least I can still play piano and get a living from it. They'll send you to the EWPA, and if you're lucky —"

"Stop it, Bernard! Not here! Now now!"

Bernard turned and looked out at the street.

"There's a place two blocks down," he said. "It's got a late license."

As they left the theater, the lights around the marquis suddenly stopped blinking. They headed down the dark street in silence.

"Did the notice say anything about the school system? Any duties that . . . former teachers might perform? Any?" Bernard was asking her.

Gertrude Raspert sat at the wooden table sipping bourbon and water and shook her head. She thought of her recent letter to Bernard and went over the events of the past years that had led up to the letter — as if, in going over those events, she might find something — anything — upon which to grab.

It had begun, perhaps, with no beginning at all. She had read the newspaper articles covering a number of speeches made against the recent and successful teachers' strikes across the country, and dismissed such speeches as

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myopic demagoguery — ignorant, uninformed and useless. Any experienced teacher was aware of the public's hostility toward the profession. It was nothing new. It went as far back as Socrates, and probably beyond. For community leaders and politicians to play on such hostility was nothing new either.

Next came the warnings.

Union leaders cautioned teachers that school superintendents across the country were starting to get dismissed and that more responsive, board-oriented superintendents were appointed in their places. The following school year Gertrude read newspaper accounts of testimonies given by educational psychologists to state and national legislative committees. The uncertainty of the teacher's presence in the classroom due to annual strike possibilities, they testified, was inhibiting student trust. As a result, students were developing weak foundations upon which to build confidence and master skills.

In the following election year, the makeup of school boards changed further.

More superintendents were removed.

Then came the announcements.

A new didactic computer had been developed — created for the specific purpose of replacing the strike-oriented classroom teacher. It would go into operation in counties across the country over the next five years. This was the proclamation of hundreds of local boards of education and their new superintendents.

Quickly, the unions challenged such moves in the courts. And as quickly were overruled by the courts until, finally, the Supreme Court decided that school boards had absolute power regarding teaching methods in their districts and counties. Trust was to be reintroduced into the schools through the removal of the classroom teacher. It was that simple. The highest court in the land had decreed it.

After thirty-one years in the field, Gertrude Raspert was displaced from classroom teaching. She and a few fortunate others became what were called "unit facilitators." These jobs entailed meeting with those students — or units, as students were now referred to — whose mean scores in a given subject had deviated five points below the mean score of their class. She would work with the students until their scores rose to the mean level. Then they would return to the computer classroom.

It was tutoring. Nothing more. Gertrude Raspert knew it.

In spite of the humiliation, the pain, the resentment, she decided to give it her best. She worked hard. She adjusted. Eventually, she became known as the "unit facilitator" who, after six weeks, brought the scores of below-average students anywhere from ten to twenty points ahead of the mean of their class. She was a threat to the new system, and she knew it. Then, one

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year ago, the same superintendents announced that before the next school year a new computer would be put into operation. Not only could it do the job of a unit facilitator and correct a lower student — rather, unit — score, but it could anticipate that drop in score and raise it before it fell.

Now, at age sixty-five, Gertrude Raspert had been displaced a second time. She was a full ten years away from retirement, which had been moved up in order to deal with the problem of social security entitlements, and painfully aware of a recent law that had resurrected the WPA and amended it into the EWPA — the Elderly Works Progress Administration. Now that immigration was prohibited, she feared the EWPA could be used to force her and ex-teachers like her into low-paying, menial jobs.

"Anything at all?" Bernard continued. "If the EWPA gets hold of you — They're long on politics and short on experience. Anything? Tutoring retirees, or . . . criminals? Anyone?"

"Nothing," she answered.

"When are you supposed to report back to the bastards?"

"I should have returned as soon as my contract with the school system expired."

"When was that, Gertie?"

"After I finished with my summer units — students," she answered.

"That was over two months ago! There are penalties if you don't report on time, Gertie! You know that. It could mean a lesser job, a long-term menial job with —"

"I know about their penalties. I know about their rules. I know about their procedures."

"Aren't you —?"

"No. I'm not. I don't know what job slot . . . where I've been placed. I don't care."

She stared at her purse and thought of the second envelope inside along with Bernard's. Gertrude raised her head, looked up at the ceiling, and breathed deep. She thought of the red light in the monorail station, and said, "I'm not going to report."

"The penalties, Gertie. You should —"

"God!" she moaned. "You don't understand." And then whimpered: "You just don't understand."

A middle-aged man wearing a work suit and work shoes turned from the Tarot card reader across from him and stared. The reader said something that brought his gaze back to the cards spread out on the table between them. The bartender aimed a suspicious look from across the room, then proceeded to set up a beer for a counter customer.

"Let's get out of here," Gertrude finally said.

She got up and headed for the door. Bernard followed.

There were few if any places still open. So they headed toward the electric

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bus depot where the all-night restaurant there catered to stop-over customers and nighthawks such as Bernard and Gertrude.

They took a breakfast special and sipped through five cups of coffee until five o'clock, when they got up and Bernard paid their bill. Gertrude gave the customary twenty-per-cent tip to the manager, who punched the cash register's computer that recorded the waitress' and bus boy's earnings and deducted eight per cent for the IRS. Gertrude broke the rules by returning to give the waitress — who looked about Gertrude's age — a personal tip while the manager gave the customary and timely turn of his back as he read through the newspaper.

Outside, she climbed into a waiting electric taxi, with Bernard following behind her. She spoke into the implanted microphone overhead, telling it her desired destination. From a loudspeaker behind them came an electric voice stating the distance of such a trip and its cost, requesting that the passenger state whether this trip was for business or pleasure, and adding that such information would be recorded for tax purposes.

"Personal pleasure!" Gertrude snapped.

She slipped her credit card into a slot in front of her, waited for the machine to record and compute, then received her card back and returned it to her purse.

"Sure you don't want to tell it to wait for us?" Bernard asked as they started moving. "Where you want to go . . . that's some distance."

As if to avoid being overheard, she gave a negative nod of her head.

"Used to be you needed cash to take these things. Some people even made a living driving them," Bernard said as he laid his head against the back seat of the cab and quickly fell asleep.

Gertrude didn't hear him as she stared out the window into the dark, early morning.

It was dawn by the time the cab made its way up the side of the mountain and came to a halt. It opened its sliding doors, gave them an electric, monotoned "Thank you" as they stepped out, quietly brought the doors shut, sealed them tight, and began its return trip down the side of the mountain to town.

Gertrude stood, hesitating, along the side of the road. Finally, she walked to the perimeter of the overlook and stepped up to the protective railing. Bernard moved behind her.

"Horseshoe Curve, Bernard. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Beautiful, Gertie," he answered, and grasped the railing beside her.

Gertrude leaned forward and stared at the railroad tracks below.

"Once upon a time," she said without turning around, "a young woman married a handsome and talented prince. It was before the time of the monorails. She and her prince were taking a honeymoon trip on a railroad passenger train. Eventually, the train brought them to this very mountain. It was

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early morning and the prince was still asleep. But the young woman was quite awake, and when she looked out the window at the side of the mountain, she could see the wings of angels reflecting the rays of a golden sun. She never saw the angels, only their wings. I think . . . if I tried, Bernard, I could see the angels now."

She turned and looked at him.

"You don't remember that train ride, do you?" she said to him.

Bernard continued to clutch the railing with one hand and placed his other hand on her shoulder.

"I remember, Gertie," he answered.

She turned and moved to the side, causing his hand to fall.

"Thirty-five years," she said. "Thirty-five years."

Bernard moved behind her, keeping a grasp on the railing.

"I used to teach them about the importance of the buffalo. Most of the students — we still called them students, then — all they wanted to know were the names of important people — Indians and generals — and dates of important events. But a few of them — just a few — understood how the buffalo's disappearance carried more importance than any one battle or individual ever could. I can't tell you how much satisfaction that brought me . . . to see them understand that."

"Gertie . . ."

"A way of life, Bernard."

"The memories, Gertie. They can't take —"

"— whole ways of life pushed aside. Pushed aside again and again, until —"

She stared up into the morning sky. The sun's rays had just begun to penetrate through the occasional openings in the passing clouds.

As much to herself as to Bernard, she repeated, "We must not forget. The words and the memories must be kept alive. If we did not do that, Bernard, I don't think I could endure it one moment longer. I would jump off right here. Right down upon our honeymoon Horseshoe Curve railroad tracks."

Bernard grasped her shoulder firmly.

"You're not going to do anything stupid, are you, Gertie?"

Gertrude let out a prolonged laugh until, finally, her laughter became a muffled sob.

"At least you ask," she uttered.

She wiped her eyes, her cheeks, opened her purse, took out a handkerchief, and blew into it.

"I am about to do something stupid, yes, but it is not jumping off this mountain down onto Horseshoe Curve."

He relaxed his grasp.

Gertrude returned the handkerchief to her purse, took out an envelope, and held it up.

"Anna Dickinson," she said. "Remember Anna Dickinson?"

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"She was one of your first students. Not one of your brightest, but one of your most enthusiastic. How long —?"

"Thirty-five years ago," she answered. "I had her as a student after you and I returned from —"

"— our Horseshoe Curve honeymoon," Bernard finished for her.

Gertrude looked down at the rusted, weed-covered railroad tracks of Horseshoe Curve.

"Anna is teaching now, Bernard. One of my first students . . . She is the one carrying . . . keeping the memories, the words alive."

"Teaching? Where would she be teaching these days?"

"There is a group of parents in one of the communities of Colorado. They send their children to the learning centers during the day. At night Anna teaches them. She teaches them the only way students can be taught — personally. Anna has invited me to join her, Bernard."

Bernard stepped back from her.

"How long do you think it will take for them to be found out! How can you even think — how can you even tell me about it! Well, Gertie, you are doing something stupid. You're right about that."

He grabbed her chin with his long fingers.

"They'll have you cleaning floors on your hands and knees, little Mrs. Gertie Raspert. On your hands and knees . . . until you die."

She grabbed his hand and gently lowered it from her chin.

"I was going to ask — even beg you — to go with me."

Bernard almost jumped away from her; he grasped the railing tightly.

"To teach the students the kind of music you played when we first met."

He stared back at her, coldly, from a distance.

"They can hear my music at the exposition," he said in icelike words.

"It's not teaching."

"What is teaching these days?"

"Human beings struggling . . . sharing discoveries together, Bernard. Teaching is not entertainment. It is not that."

"But that is what I am, Gertie, an entertainer."

She stared up at Bernard's dyed-black hair.

"Yes," she pronounced, and bowed her head.

"I'm sorry," Bernard said.

He came up and put his arms around her.

They held each other for a long time.

Later they walked the twelve kilometers to the nearest bus depot where — after a three-hour wait — they caught the electric bus to town. Once in town, Gertrude retrieved her suitcase and brought it to Bernard's room. When Gertrude saw how the walls were as dirty and the rug as threadbare as those in the lobby of the theater where he worked, she understood why he had accepted the contract with the exposition. She didn't like it, but she also un-

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derstood why he could not go with her.

That week Bernard went to work as usual. He would come back late and wake her up, and they would make love. Afterward, each and every part of Gertrude's body felt free of gravity, free from the earth itself. Gertrude couldn't remember experiencing such sensations in . . . in thirty-five years.

On her last evening there, Bernard took off work, and they walked slowly around town and finally ended by sitting for a long time on a park bench that faced a life-sized statue of a boy sitting on a rock, his head bowed, and a girl standing over him with an umbrella. Gertrude was nervous and frightened at leaving for Colorado the next day, and that night she made love to Bernard until her fear and nervousness disappeared. In the middle of the night she woke up crying, and Bernard held her until she fell asleep again.

The next morning, as Bernard walked with her toward the boarding area of the monorail station, he promised he would write as soon as he got settled on the west coast. She knew from experience that it would take much longer, but she only squeezed his hand and said nothing. When the electronic voice from the station announced that it was departure time, they gave each other a long hug. No one around seemed to notice.

"Thank you for being here, Bernard," she said softly.

"Be careful, Gertie," he said.

The monorail came to a sudden, noiseless stop beside her. She gave him a forced smile, turned, hesitated, then grasped her suitcase and stepped through two sliding doors that locked shut as soon as she sat down.

Later, as the monorail darted through tunneled mountains once circumvented slowly, she again recalled her childhood. She remembered how she had gotten hold of a passenger schedule so that she could stand nearby when the trains passed. She recalled how one certain engineer used to always wave to her from the seat of his huge diesel engine, and how he seemed to always pull a bright red caboose at the end of his train. Then she recalled her history lessons, and thought with irony of how the railroads themselves had contributed to the decline of the buffalo.

"A way of life," she muttered, as she stared out a window that revealed split-second flashes of elongated farmhouses and distorted fields.

"We must not forget," she repeated. "The words and the memories must be kept alive." ✪

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THE SIN OF YIN, THE CLANG OF YANG

ESSAY

by Dean R. Lambe

Dean R. Lambe earned a doctorate in psychobiology and was promptly thrown out of Academia. Co-author of the novel The Odysseus Solution *(with Michael Banks), he contributes both fact and fiction to SF magazines and anthologies, when he isn't watching the corn wilt in the drought on his Ohio farm. Recently, the Halls of Ivy have welcomed him back to teach about both the human brain and science fiction — in the same course.*

All right, I'll admit it: on alternate Tuesdays, I wish that science fiction were written only by scientists. By science fiction, I don't mean what Fritz Leiber writes, or what John Shirley writes, or even most of what Ray Bradbury has written. Like pornography, we know real SF when we read it, and we need not quibble about definitions. Fantasy, speculative fiction, and even science fantasy are perfectly respectable categories, but that's not what I've chosen as the topic for today's sermon. I mean the stuff with rivets, the right stuff, the hard stuff, the sensawonder scientific extrapolation (although what is "real," "hard," or "scientific" has certainly changed a lot since the Golden Age, since anybody's Golden Age). I mean what Hugo Gernsback called scientifiction, what he hoped would prove to be scientifically educational for the masses.

Of Rules and Metaphors

There's a wonderful exchange in the film *Murphy's Romance,* when the small-town druggist played by James Garner meets Sally Field for the first time.

"Then you know the rules?" he says, once he has established that she's not from a big city.

She answers: "The rules? You mean, keep your front room picked up? Don't sit around in your bathrobe after 10 o'clock in the morning? Don't mess with a married man?"

"That's part of it. . . . We're in the mainstream."

Only we, the SF "we," aren't mainstream at all. Out of the pulps, over the years, we've mastered all the tricks and techniques of the literary mainstream, but there's always been something more to SF, something, well, scientific. A Doris Lessing or an Ira Levin, for all the critical discussion of their "sci-fi" works, doesn't know the rules, doesn't know the conventions (in all senses) of SF. These and many other mainstream writers, as well as the fish and fowl in the science fantasy pool, treat "science as metaphor," to cite one of our in-house scholars, James Gunn. Fine, oft brilliant writing though they may produce, it's not SF.

While treatment of scientific hypotheses and empirical data metaphorically, symbolically, may make perfect sense to students of literature and language, there is great danger that such attitudes will lay false gods before the young and impressionable. The serious pitfalls of such notions about scientific endeavor — the firmest grip we have on reality, after all — are no better illustrated then in the mouths of hypocritical televangelists who lie

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about evolutionary biology as "just a theory." I fear that stories, which seem to be SF but are really fantasy, risk similar false preaching. In fact, some of the psychobiological themes currently followed by some of our best, new writers run fingernails down the blackboard of my mind.

It's as if the medium has been eaten by a dystopian message; as if the cold, dark side of the hill, the yin of negativeness, has overcome the classic, strong, positive, and bright yang of SF. Have writers who were 1960s Flower Children gone to seed? Do their works have "special agendas" of environmentalist atonement, of catharsis through surrender to the engulfing alien Other, where the mystic (and mythic) East is always somehow better than Yankee know-how, than R & D for you and me? Is it better, as per the climax of Orson Scott Card's *Speaker for the Dead* (1986), to abandon macho progress, individuality and technology, give in to the alien, and become a tree?

The Big Three, the Golden Boys of Anglo-American science fiction, Asimov, Clarke, and Heinlein, have given us pretty much an anthropocentric galaxy. Oh, they've had their aliens, all three of the Grand Masters, but rarely. And even in his classic *Childhood's End* (1953) and in the implications of the film *2001* Arthur C. Clarke doesn't make mankind subservient to the ancient, omniscient but not-so-alien race. The pattern, so beloved of editor John W. Campbell, Jr., is maintained: man is the meanest SOB in the valley, and through persistence, intellect, and free will, the species prevails. Human spirit, human hope wins through in the end. Even in the pastoral, romantic works of late Clifford Simak, where man is often more fondly remembered by his faithful servant robots and dogs than he is present as a "can do" actor, the dignity and goodness of the species survives in its works.

True, the late Mr. Heinlein's Future History, Asimov's merged Foundation and Robot novels, and Clarke's near and distant Earth songs say little about teeming masses. Their works all deny the horrible heat death of the species, the billions fouling their own nest with overpopulation. While nuclear or biological armageddon is often mentioned in the pulp-era stories and in the classic texts well into the 1970s, and while individuals end lives of quiet desperation, mankind survives, mankind triumphs. Earth, as Ecclesiastes and George R. Stewart (1949) would have it, abides. *Orion Shall Rise* (1983), as Poul Anderson has written, and a better, wiser humanity shall have the stars.

That message, that increasingly American-influenced and -dominated theme of hope for the future, remains the heart of what is popular in science fiction throughout the world. With the possible exception of the French — who idolize Philip K. Dick as they honor Jerry Lewis — hardcore, by our own bootstraps, "can do" SF is what the readers in the developed nations prefer, from Shanghai to Frankfurt, from Sydney to Fresno. In the developing areas, too, as mythology and fantastic causality, so basic to illiterate, powerless peoples, are replaced by education and technology, the SF of hope and triumph gains new readers.

Thus it matters when stories which seem to be yin/yang, which seem to be technologically well thought-out extrapolations tempered by human realities, are one-sided, are mostly yin. For the message of hope through progress, of freedom through development, inspired generations of scientists and engineers, and continues to do so today. When the science is wrong,

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however, when the spirit of the tale is surrender to the alien Other, what then of hope? Will the ghetto child be inspired to stay in school through stories about mankind as loser? Is it any wonder, then, that I begin to envy the straightforward hemlock solution offered by Athenians to the teaching of false gods and the corruption of children?

Recently, some have implied that battle lines should be drawn on the basis of gender, that here be trenches for female scribes of elvish fantasy under cannonade, bombast and taunt from males safe in their armor of rational empiricism. Only the most superificial analysis of the writers and their works in our genre (of, in fact, the whole history of arts and letters) would support such a fallacious conclusion. While accident of birth or experience might bias one to write in a particular voice and mode, no sexist explanation, no claim of chromosomal or hormonal determinism, need concern us here, for it would be at odds with the classic Taoist unity of yang and yin (and it's Western, Jungian archetypal equivalent). Since those very few unfortunates who have actually had their cortical hemispheres surgically separated can barely read, no nonsense about "left brain vs. right brain" need concern us either. That I do not cite works of high or low, Celtic or Byzantine, hairy-toed or floppy-eared fantasy is because they lie outside the scope of this discussion. Fantasy, the parental category, after all, is no more "women's work" than J. R. R. Tolkien was an astrophysicist.

On the science-fiction side, macho, outgoing yang and flowery, introverted yin are no more gender specific than is the case with fantasy. C. J. Cherryh, R. M. Meluch, and Lois McMaster Bujold, to mention just three, bang out yang in the tough romantic, John Wayne individualistic mode of classic Heinlein, while numerous male writers, especially in contemporary Britain, have flowed down the yin side of the hill for many years. This is not a distinction of gender role or sexual politics, but one of tone and theme.

Do I Protest Too Much?

Who are the guilty? As I've said to one of them, newcomer Judith Moffett, I'd not bat a third eye, were not she and Orson Scott Card and Octavia Butler — to name a few I'm going to pick on — very fine, skilled writers. They know science-fiction conventions (the runes, not the motels full of Trekkies) and try to follow them. Were they not producing prize-winning work, I wouldn't care. If they tossed off a page-turner, in competition "for my beer money" as the dear departed ghost of Lazarus Long would say, I wouldn't be scratching this itch between my keyboards. Since they are engaging more than a few million of my neurons with well-crafted prose, however, I yelp when I find sand in the works.

When a phone-home radio message takes 20 years to travel the 10.8 light-years between Epsilon Eridani II and Earth, as in Moffett's first novel, *Pennterra* (1987), I wince. When Moffett suggests that the brave new worlders use an electrically powered space shuttle to reach orbit, I begin to grind my teeth. When Alpha Centauri appears in the Southern California sky of Butler's *Clay's Ark* (1984), or a terrestrial cathedral pipe organ is transplanted to the open atmosphere of Mars as in Melinda Snodgrass's *Circuit Breaker* (1987), my eyebrows begin to smoke. Or my tongue turns catty, as when I said to Orson Scott Card a couple years back with regard

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to a furball that stuck in my throat while trying to dine with his *Speaker for the Dead* Buggers and Piggies: you don't really think that electrons flow at the speed of light do you? Down wires, around transistors, across light bulbs, through batteries? You don't really think that? In fairness, we all slip up on an easily checked fact or three (hoping against hope, I suppose, that there still exists an editor who knows a neutron from a nematode). But basic principles, limitations to the universe as we know it, should not snap the reader's disbelief suspenders. Thus did I also object to the way science was done, or more to the point, not done at all, on Card's planet Lusitania, where apparently no farmers ever got curious about the plants, no miners ever wondered about the fossils, and no amateur birdwatchers took field notes. Despite contemporary television mythology, science is more than paper degrees; ordinary folks contribute a lot of data.

I have no quibble, please note, with legitimate SF gimmicks, necessary "beyond this horizon" notions like FTL travel or the ansible FTL communications of the above-mentioned Card novel (and before that, in Ursula LeGuin's *The Dispossessed* (1974), etc.). Only when the rules are broken through ignorance or insouciance, only when nobody says: "There goes Newton's Third Law, . . ." as in Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama* (1973), should we call for the stocks and horsewhips and shield the eyes of impressionable children.

Unfortunately, both critic and *auteur* from the mainstream occasionally crawl onto our land in the vain hope that a few "sci-fi" terms will make them part of our evolving species. Such chimeras as the recent *The Singing: A Fable about What Makes Us Human (1988)* by Theron Raines rarely fool even children with nonsense like telepathic, silicon-chemistry Martians in search of human females (wasn't *Mars Needs Women* a dumb movie, even in 1968?).

Most true SF writers of this suspect, A-bomb to A-OK generation (my generation, I freely admit, although I widen the net beyond the dubious term, "baby boom"), schooled if not born between Manhattan Project and Sputnik, most create terrific alien life forms. Ironically, the women often do it best, for many female children were guided, if not pushed into "soft" biology, while the menfolk were off chasing Sputnik in the "real" science courses. Our generation's answer to keeping 'em pregnant and barefoot, I suppose, only it backfired. While the NSF was so busy granting "masculine" pursuits, biology turned "hard science," and dilated the door open to genetic engineering, to the nanotechnology revolution that will occupy our entire future.

Something Ecotopian This Way Comes

Yet it is in their future biology, as reflected in evolutionary heritage and behavioral ecology, and within their psychobiological models of man and alien (a field wherein, like my dog, I am paper-trained) that many contemporary SF works scare me the most. In the "Tao of biology" of many prominent writers, only yin succeeds, and the yang of science and progress not only fails but is the devil's work. All too often, a "limits of growth" scenario is coupled with an environmentalist retreat to the "simple life," with no thought to how brutal and short said simplicity would be when the microchips fail. And I'll never understand how a pastoral, low-tech society

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can fuel and maintain orbital landers.

Consider, too, the defeatist "toolmaker koan," as expressed in John McLoughlin's novel (1987) by the same name, and called the "Human Contradiction" in Octavia Butler's *Dawn* (1987) and its sequel, *Adulthood Rites* (1988). This argument, as put forth by the "rescuing" aliens in both Butler's and McLoughlin's tales, maintains that our toolmaking, aggressive intelligence necessarily leads to species extinction through warfare. Man is doomed, therefore, unless saved by an elder race. This happy thought is further refined by David Brin in *The Postman* (1985), where characters claim that the fault, dear Us-Brute, lies not in our stars but with some rotten male apples in the genetic barrel. Both Brin and Butler offer rather dubious DNA engineering as a solution.

Actually, Brin would have the women take over and simply weed out the brutes with a bit of sociobiological eugenics that was discredited almost 50 years ago. Butler's Contradiction is pure yin, and her argument that macho progressiveness and "hierarchical behaviors" overcome intelligence and doom mankind to extinction may be trendy, but this "males must go" rationale rests on a sand castle of soggy and suspect evidence.

I am puzzled as to the origin of this bizarre "koan" or "contradiction." To be sure, no less than Carl Sagan has put his imprimatur on the notion, for Sagan offers this good reason to never get up in the morning as a possible answer to the Fermi Paradox, the "well, where are they, then?" question begged by his suggestion of billions of inhabited planets in our galaxy. Since Sagan has literally fouled the scientific atmosphere with the dataless "nuclear winter" scenario, however, he doesn't seem to be Johnny Carson's favorite scientist anymore, and there's little reason to believe his fear that human creativity is a suicidal trait either.

Certainly no anthropological data, no examination of our primate heritage, suggests that the yang side is inevitably deadly, that aggression and intelligence are other than survival traits. True, when a species overcrowds its territory, when resources become scarce, then bio-behavioral feedback mechanisms break down, but that's all the more reason to push fledgling mankind out of its solitary nest and into the energy and material plenty of space. In fact, there's far more justification in studies of our behavioral genetics and anthropoid history for the neo-feudal societies in *The Mote in God's Eye* (1974) and in *Oath of Fealty* (1981) by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle than there is rationale for any gene to make the world go boom. But then, Niven and Pournelle have never been praised for their female characters, let alone giving in to yin, and they are older than the writers being impaled on my microscope slide.

Contrast, if you will, the message of Niven, Pournelle, and Barnes's *The Legacy of Heorot* (1987) with that of Judith Moffett's *Pennterra* (1987). In the former, the first humans to colonize the extrasolar planet Avelon encounter a terrible ecological challenge, make many errors of judgment in learning to live with the vicious, aquatic predatory grendels, and finally master their new environment — classic yang with a bit of yin. On Moffett's teleological, pseudo-Lamarckian planet, Pennterra, on the other hand, a similar band of isolated human colonists, with a similar level of technology, follows the strictures of the native Hrossa. Use of machines

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(curiously, only big ones) will cause the planet to destroy any humans who live outside their original river valley settlement. Attempts to be yang by a second non-Quaker starship crew yield the predicted genetic backlash, and only full yin surrender to the Big Green Bisexuals is possible. To survive on Pennterra is to stop being human.

The message is even stronger in Butler's Xenogenesis Trilogy, where in *Adulthood Rites* the Oankali travel the galaxy as a chilling, organic reversal to Fred Saberhagen's Berserkers, and destroy the human gene pool in order to save it — other-directedness with no return ticket!

Keep Watching the Skies?

What does it all mean, really? Skylarks and Bucks blasted their way through the universe not so long ago, but now scaled BEMs love us to death because we're hell bent to snuff ourselves anyway? C'mon, I grew up with the silly kindergarten "hide under the desk" nuclear attack drills, too. In fact, I grew up on Puget Sound where Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* (1957) put a fishing jetty amidst the radioactive ruins, a fishing jetty that didn't exist until 12 years after that archetypal post-holocaust novel was published. Yet, I see no reason for the species to fold up like chrysanthemum petals before an extraterrestrial night.

Does all this colorful proliferation of alien biology that, Blob-like, engulfs the piece of work that is man represent some approaching second millennium nihilism? Or does this trend toward loss of hope in an uniquely human future follow some literary "post-Vietnam syndrome," some Gotterdammerung of the Golden Arches and Coca-Cola, some surrender to the yin of folded hands and Bushido Codes? Is this enviornmentalist message gone wild, this shaded view of Western technological progress but a friendlier, more open version of the Cyberpunk drug-inspired escape into narcissistic catatonia? Is this really the dark side of the force, and if so, why can't one leaven a little yang with all that yin? I object to the alien victory, to the notion that *Homo sapiens* must mutate to an extraterrestrial drummer, must drop all hubris and take Lucifer's fall, before being allowed into the galaxy at large.

Frankly, it's pretty depressing, and I have to wonder what it's teaching the new readers about science fiction. Now that the genre is literate and on the best-seller lists, now that college courses regularly feature analyses of works newer than *Dhalgren* (1974) and *Dune* (1965), what subtext is tickling the unconscious: give up, kid, there's not only no free lunch, but pulling on your bootstraps hurts the birdies in the trees? Entropy will win, so don't bother?

Phooey! The science may have been dismal in those pulpy, astroblaster days, but the song ended on a high note. Not so long ago, if the slimy grubs from Tau Ceti were on their way, you knew how the battle would end. Now it seems, with the accent on the negative, we're to hope they have a spare cage in their zoo. I don't buy it. Lower-case e. e. cummings had the right of it: there is another universe next door. Let's go. Now, by ourselves. Looking for the Other to do it for us guarantees defeat. ●

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NUCLEAR SPRING

"Now that the burning is over,
Now that grey winter is past,
Now that the pale sun beholds the earth through thinning haze:
the naked soil
and the wind-whistling wrecks of His cities;
Now that Mankind is finished," spoke the dog, shrieked the crow,
said the snake
and the elk and the cat —
"The secret's out:
We've barked our last and *caw*ed our last.
We're done with pretend-animal noises.
Now may we all speak the natural tongue,
a congress of beasts,
a parliament of fowls,
with voices Man did not believe in,
with words He could never hear."

"I plan to wax eloquent!" cried the crow, a soaring speck
before he was gone.
"I'll shout dictionaries to the empty fields,
and tear the faces from scarecrows.
Those pearls that were his eyes —"
"And I," sighed the uncommon house cat,
her hour come round at last,
"shall address whom I care to, as always."
"Me too!" said the fox.
"I've *coo*ed my last *coo*!" the pigeon was pleased to announce.
And the fierce bear unlocked his word-hoard,
And the voice of the turtle was heard in the land.

"Humankind *lives!*" screeched the rat.
"I've met him in my travels;
we scrounged for grubs together by the silent river,
a sorry competitor, yes,
but there he is!"

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"Say no more! Shut up quick!"
And words became babble and cackles and yelps.
Said the crow, circling back,
"*Caw!* I need practice!
We'll have to resume
the whole damn charade."

Then rose the great whale
out of the blackened deep,
dying, the last of his kind,
his island back volcanic with sores.
"Let Mankind sing *my* song,
that it may continue after I'm gone.
The rest of you, go on speaking.
Hide nothing.
Join voices with his in our peaceable kingdom,
without any master,
without any judge,
for Man is a beast now,
merely one of us at last."

— Darrell Schweitzer



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WOODY & ME
by Sharan Newman
art: Paul Jaquays



*Sharan Newman comes from a family of post-Civil War Nebraska pioneers, and so she naturally became a medievalist and wrote Arthurian and Irish novels (*The Dagda's Harp, Guinevere, The Chessboard Queen, *and* Guinevere Evermore *— all from St. Martin's Press).*

About this story, Sharan says, "I think 'Woody & Me' may be an effort at returning to my roots, even though my medieval training still influences me."

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My husband, Woody, he's always been kinda odd. He looks at things, stuff no one else cares about, and he hears things, he says, but I never know what he means. Like, somedays he'll sit on the porch for hours just watching the clouds race by, and not even come in for supper, not till I call him real loud, two or three times. Then he'll be sorry and say he couldn't hear me, the world was singing so loud. I never hear nothing singing. Kitty Willoughby says his dad must've slugged him once too often when he was a kid. But I always tell her to mind her own business. We ain't starving nor ever going to. Woody's my man and I gotta stick up for him. But once in a while he can make me real mad, like last summer when he decided that we weren't going to the fair.

"But we ain't been off this farm once all year, Woody!" I told him. "You've been working hard. We deserve to go! And I been looking forward to it so much! Why, everybody goes to the fair, even old Fred Kingsley. It's the only thing that happens here the whole year long. Come on, Woody, please!"

He just shook his head slow like he sometimes does, and I knew I was in for a fight. I wasn't going to let him do me out of the one piece of fun to come round all year. So I went to work on him.

Well, it took me most of the week to do it. I thought for a while that I'd have to forget it. Nothing seemed to move him. He'd just sit across from me or lie beside me and shake his head. I got so mad one night that I jumped right out of bed and stomped down to the kitchen, banging the pans around until I threw my biggest skillet hard on the floor and sat down beside it and wailed.

I didn't even hear him come down the stairs, I was crying so hard. He was suddenly there, stooping down to pick up the skillet and me, too.

"Kitty Willoughby warned me you'd be more touchy now and I wasn't to take no notice of it. She said all women get on edge when there's a baby coming." He shrugged. "I don't know. Until you got all het up about the fair, you seemed O.K. to me. Worst thing is, I can't tell you why I don't want us to go this year; I just got a feeling. Do you think daddies get touchy, too?"

I snarfled something but he must've understood me 'cause he laughed and unstuck my hair from my face and promised we could go to the fair.

The day was bright and clear with just a bit of a sharp breeze to keep it from getting too hot. We always called it "fair weather," and I don't remember ever seeing a year when it wasn't just like that. I made Woody get up early so we could be there when the gates opened and see it all clean and shiny before the crowds came. He didn't make a fuss about that, so I figured I'd won and he'd let me enjoy myself for the day.

At first it was great. We strolled around the booths, and Woody got me a kewpie doll by knocking over a stack of milk cans with a baseball. Around the outside of the grounds were all the local exhibits: jam and quilting and livestock and suchlike. Kitty Willoughby won first prize for her patchwork

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again. That woman sews just about as fast as she can talk. But what I was really waiting for was the circus. All the other stuff, even the rides, are just side shows next to the water circus.

Well, maybe that's not the right name for it. I never did hear of another. They set up a huge pool, full of water, right in the center of the grounds, and high, high above it they set up a tightrope and trapeze, and it's up there in the wind that the juggler plays.

Almost the first thing I can remember is going to the fair with my mom and dad and leaning back until my neck cricked to watch that man way up there tossing the balls into the sunlight and never missing a one. Blue, gold, silver, green, they glittered around him. I never could figure out how he made them change colors as they passed through his hands — green, silver, gold, blue and sometimes pink as sunset. I could watch it all my life.

Then he gathers in all the balls and makes them disappear into his cloak as he leaps from the rope to the swinging trapeze. He lies down on the bar and balances a long, gold box on his feet, and as he swings farther and farther out over the pool, he spins the box on his toes until it's just a shimmer of light above us, like a star in the morning.

We were watching him do this, Woody and me, when Woody suddenly shivered and covered up his eyes.

"Something in your eye, Woody?" I asked, not even looking at him.

"No, I thought I saw . . . the box change. It was . . . something else," he answered, rubbing his face. He was sweating a lot for such a cool day.

I felt kinda bad. He didn't look too good. Maybe I shouldn't have made him come with me, after all.

"We don't need to stay for the fireworks, Woody," I told him. "Just let's wait for the silver globes and then we can go."

I saw in his face that he didn't even want to do that, but I guess I was just being selfish. It was our first baby I was carrying, and it seemed to me I should get extra special treatment. So we waited.

It was about four in the afternoon when they sent the globes out over the water. It's something that happens every year. I don't know why it's got to be so important, but no one would dream of leaving the fair until they got theirs. They can't be worth much, just little silver-painted glass globes floating across the surface of the pool. We all wade in to get them, and there's lots of laughing and splashing. It's so shallow that even the old people and the babies can do it.

Woody wasn't having a good time at all, I knew. He stood at the side and picked up the first one to roll his way. I never could do that. I hitched up my skirts and sloshed around and across the water, hunting for the best one, which was silly, 'cause they're all the same, but it's part of the fun.

You know, I was sure I got the prettiest one there, but when I got back to Woody, I found out that the globe was all scratched and cracked. I didn't

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want anything so ugly, but when I went back to the pool to get another, they had all been taken.

Woody looked awful sick when I showed him the globe. He stared at it for a long time and then took it from me and put his into my hand.

"But I don't want yours," I whined. "I want my own to be nice and shiny!"

"It don't make no difference," he insisted. "I'm just gonna throw this one away anyhow."

Just then, I heard a voice over the loudspeaker. "Ladies and gentlemen! We're sorry that some of you may not have gotten globes in perfect condition. The management apologizes and offers all those who received damaged globes the chance to exchange them at the ticket booth."

"There," I told Woody. "That's just what I'll do. You can keep yours."

I snatched the broken one from him and ran to get in line. There weren't too many people there, only eight or nine ahead of me, and I could see that they were getting even better ones, sort of to make up for the disappointment. They were kind of shimmery gold. I couldn't wait to get mine.

But then Woody came up and yanked me out of the line and started pulling me toward home.

"Woody!" I yelled. "What in hell is the matter with you? Let me go!"

"Is something wrong, ma'am?"

A man had stepped between us and was holding Woody's arm so he couldn't pull me anymore. He saw me still holding the cracked globe.

"Don't you want a new one, ma'am?" he asked. "It won't take a minute."

"She don't need a new one. She don't even need the one she's got," Woody told him. I never saw my husband look so fierce, and all over a trinket from the fair.

The man didn't let go. "She seems to want to have another globe, mister. Why don't you let her?"

His voice was real soft and gentle, and I started to go back, but Woody wouldn't let me go.

"I tell you what," he said to the man. "She can trade with me. I'll go stand in the line. That'll be all right, won't it?"

The man looked at Woody a long time, real serious, like. "You know you can't do that," he said at last, and he sounded surprised.

"Sure I can," said Woody. "She's my wife. We're gonna have a baby."

I didn't know what he was getting at. Sometimes Woody can be so pigheaded, and for nothing at all. He just glared the man down until he finally shrugged his shoulders and said there was nothing he could do; we'd have to talk to the boss.

He took us to a little wagon nearby and knocked on the door. I didn't hear anything, but he opened it up and we went in.

It was a tiny room, crowded with books and papers, flyers for the fair, and

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glittery pieces of costumes with sequins and silk. There were a lot of bags and things hanging from the walls and ceiling. I almost missed seeing the desk and the lady sitting behind it. When she spoke, I must've jumped a foot.

"I hope you have a good reason for bringing these people in here, Mr. Ariel," she said, and her voice meant that she knew he didn't. She sounded a little like Mrs. Westphal, my old grammar teacher. Gee! she could skin you alive with words.

Mr. Ariel seemed a little afraid of her, too, but he told her the story. I got the feeling while he was talking that Woody had somehow convinced him that I shouldn't get any globe at all. That made me mad. I'd set my heart on one and I started to tell her my side, but she wouldn't even listen to me. She just sat there and stared at Woody.

"You say you'll trade places with your wife?" she asked.

He nodded.

"I'll have to think about it. Give me a few minutes. I have to check the files. You can wait here. Mr. Ariel will keep you company."

She went into a back room and shut the door. I tried to ask Woody what in the world he was doing, but he wouldn't answer. He put his arms around me and kissed me and told me not to worry. I wasn't worried, just mad and getting tired. So I sat on a pile of papers and waited. Then Woody and the man, Mr. Ariel, started talking. I couldn't make head nor tail of what they meant, but somehow, I can't seem to forget it neither.

"How long you been in the business?" Woody asked. Mr. Ariel looked down and started fussing with a bolt of cloth.

"Oh, I guess I've been juggling most of my life," he answered.

Woody nodded. "And how'd you get into your other line of work?"

The cloth slipped and unrolled across the floor. Mr. Ariel didn't try to pick it up, so I did. He just stared at Woody.

"I had another job, once, a long time ago," he spoke so quiet, I almost didn't hear him. "She made me the guardian, when she built this place. All I had to do was watch out for everything and lend a hand if there was trouble. Well, there wasn't any trouble. How could there be with everything penned up so, with no chance to be anything more than they already were?"

He laughed. "They always think that Man was the first to get by her. That's just ego. Really, it started with the ostriches."

I began to think we'd jumped into a nut house, and started moving to the door, but Woody stopped me and set me down again and said politely, "Ostriches?"

Mr. Ariel smiled sadly as if he saw something that he knew wasn't there anymore. "They were so beautiful, you can't imagine, with iridescent feathers and huge gliding wings. Next thing to the angels, I always thought. It didn't seem right that they should be so exquisite and not be free. So I talked to them a while and gave them the idea of flying over the wall to see what was outside the park.

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That was all they needed. The next thing I knew, they were exploring everywhere, across mountains and oceans and almost to the stars. Well, of course she found out about it. You've seen what she did to them."

Woody nodded.

"But she gave me another chance. She's fair, after all. But then I started watching Man; Woman too, of course. I mean, there they were, romping around without fur or feathers, so clearly designed for doing something together but not knowing what. All I did was make a few suggestions. They caught on to it quickly enough."

Woody blushed. He never did like that kind of talk. Mr. Ariel shrugged.

"I couldn't hide that. They were experimenting all over the place and giving the other animals ideas. This time she was really mad."

He was quiet a minute. Woody came closer to him.

"I know what happened to us," he said. "What did she do to you?"

He sighed. "You guessed already. I am the instrument," he whispered. "I became Death."

I knew this guy had to be crazy, but there was something in his eyes that made me feel sick and cold and scared down to my toes. All I wanted was for Woody to take me out of there.

Now, I don't want you to get this next part wrong. Woody's all man and I should know it, but he went right up to this Mr. Ariel and put his arms around him, and the man didn't move away at all, just put his head on Woody's shoulder and cried like a baby.

That was when the boss came back. She looked at those two men and I don't know what she thought, but she came to me and took away the cracked globe that I was still holding, and rummaged around in the desk until she found a blue rubber one with stars on it, the kind a kid can bounce. She gave it to me and smiled and then she turned to Woody.

"I think you should take your wife home," she said. "She's had a long day. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, Woody. You're a very unusual man. I hope we meet again sometime."

Woody shook her hand and said, "Thank you, ma'am. I'd like that, only not for some time. We may not be getting to the fair for a while. We'll be pretty busy. You see, we're expecting."

She smiled again. "Yes, I see. Well, you take your time, Woody. I can wait."

"What about him?" Woody asked, nodding to Mr. Ariel.

She shook her head. "That's between him and me, Woody. I don't think he's ready yet. Nor is Man. But I'm giving some thought to the case of the Ostrich."

We left then. Woody didn't talk all the way home, and I didn't know what to say. So we got back and I made supper and he went out and sat on the porch. When it was ready, I started to holler at him. Then I looked at my

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globe, rolling its stars across the kitchen floor, and I went out and touched him on the shoulder and looked up at the clouds running away into the sunset, all red and purple. I just stood there a minute, watching, and then Woody got up and kissed me.

"I smell supper on the table," he laughed. "Don't you ever be afraid to yell at me to come to one of your good meals. Food gets cold. The sky don't matter all that much. It'll still be there tomorrow."

And the next time Kitty Willoughby starts running down my Woody, I'm gonna laugh in her face. She don't know nothing about it.

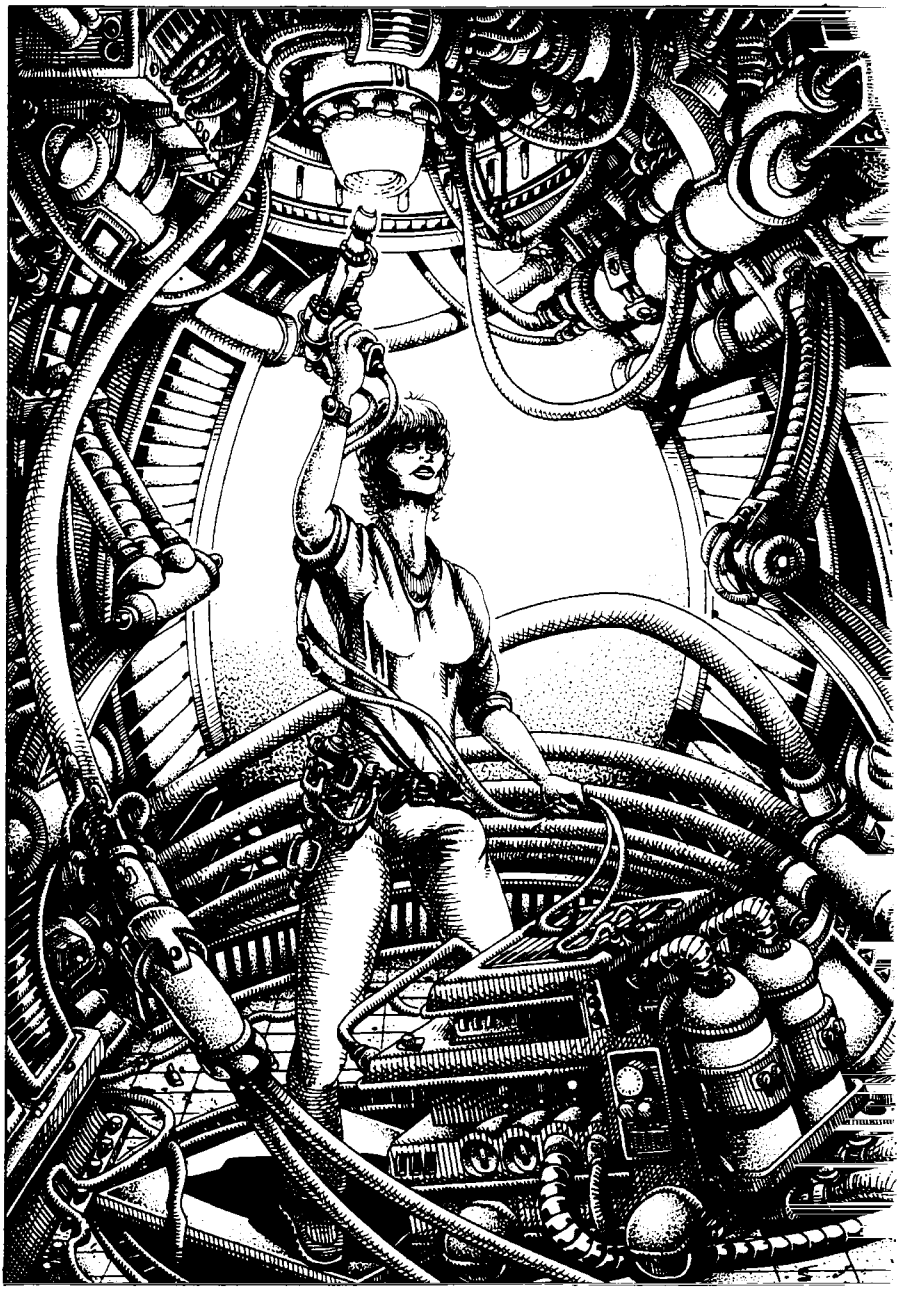


DOROTHY AND THE SEQUELS

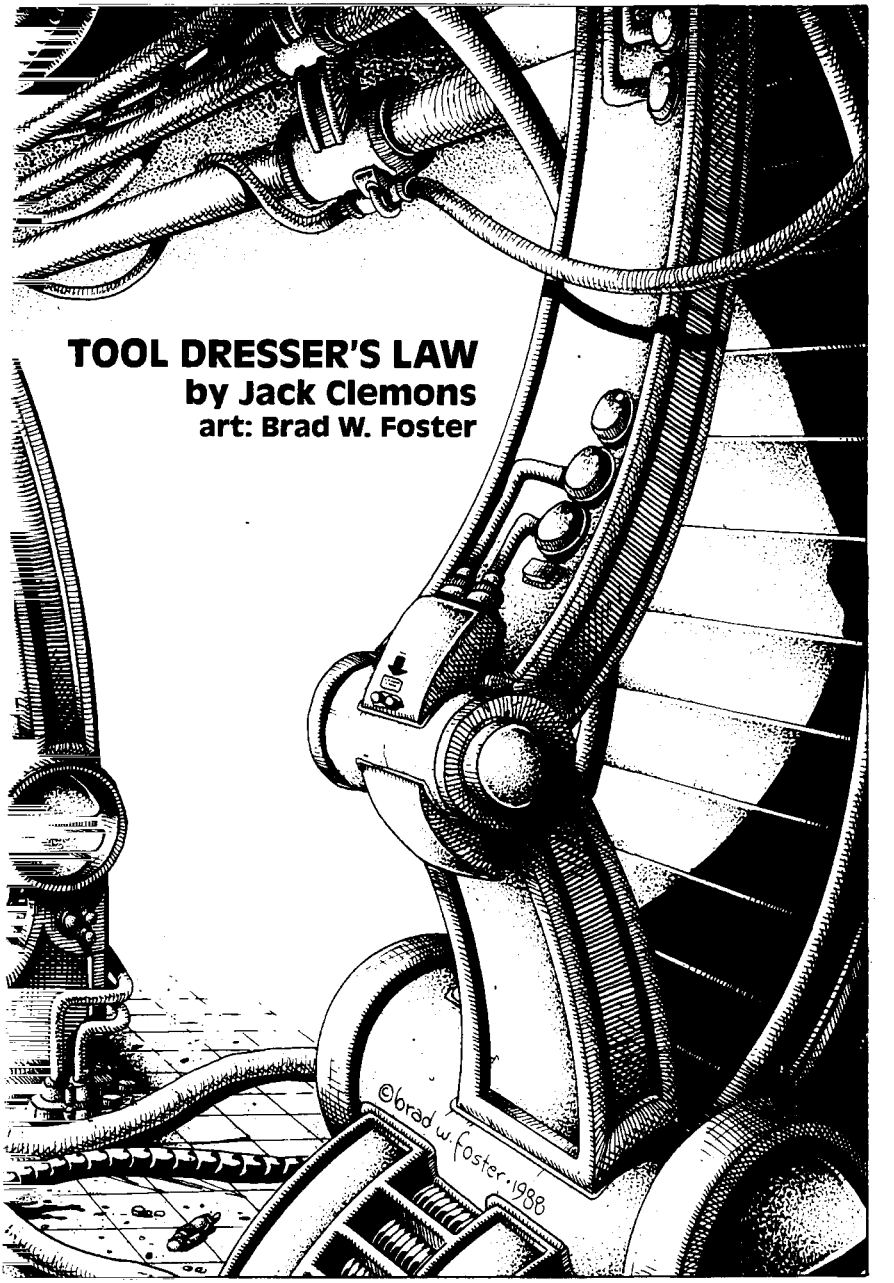
Dorothy never went over the rainbow.
Others did, plenty of them.
The Tin Woodman
Prince Tatters with his father's rescued head
The elegant elephant Kabumpo
Even a wooden whale.
Not Dorothy.
Dorothy went over the wind
Through earth
And water
Sailed the burning sand
To the land of heart's desire.
It wasn't home.
But at last she vanished into Oz
Quite simply on a wish
Waking from Kansas as a dream.

— Ruth Berman

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Jack Clemons was born in central Pennsylvania and educated in Florida. He spent the majority of his career in South Texas, where he trained astronauts, designed spacecraft systems, and managed a large NASA software project. He then moved to Connecticut and established a second career as a manager of a technical marketing team.

The author's last appearance in Amazing® Stories *was "Will Little Note, Nor Long Remember" (November 1987); he is currently working on a novel that incorporates that story. His juvenile Christmas fantasy novel,* Gruesome John Frederick, *was published by Aegina Press in 1987.*

Wildcatter dropped onto Hawking a month before we reached perihelion. We slammed down after losing a brutal tug of war between our ship and the singularity that had started when we closed to 60 klicks. I was in the cockpit running a spectrometry survey through the assayer ay-eye during our final approach. I have flown a lot of A.U.s with McRae; he is a damn fine pilot. I looked up from the display when I heard him curse.

"Geezus!" he hissed. His face was rigid.

"What is it, Curt?" I asked him. I thought I heard panic in his voice, and it made me edgy.

"We're dropping down one helluva g-cliff," he said. "This baby could suck the numbers off a coin!"

I twisted in my seat to glance at the forward screen. Hawking didn't *look* very formidable, just another hunk of gray-brown rock. I turned back to look at McRae.

"We in any trouble?" I asked.

No answer.

"Curt. . . ?"

No answer. He was staring holes in the readout panel; he had completely dismissed me.

I don't think he took three breaths in the entire fifteen minutes it took him to keep from augering in. I remember his face checkered with colored light from the crazy flickering panel displays. His hand was gripping the stick so tightly that this fingers were bone white from the knuckles to the nails. We collided, hard, and Hawking swiped once at us and missed. We bounced about 100 meters before the landing struts slapped the dustless rock again — and this time dug in.

McRae later liked to brag that he'd had it under control all the way. But I was there. McRae blew it. He had underestimated the muscle of that sucker, and I guess the rest of us can be glad he was a better pilot than judge of character.

Not to say that Hawking was an easy character to judge. Nothing with

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axes that short should have packed that many gees. We had all read the reports filed by the IGA several months earlier, just after the singularity was discovered wandering in solar system real estate. Star occultations, apparent albedo, etc., etc., all put Hawking at about the size of Cuba. Large for an asteroid (which is what it looked like) but tiny by planetary standards.

Then the early reports from the Chinese flyby and the Korean drone lander had come in, followed by the extensive data supplied by the Japanese survey party, made while Hawking was out beyond the Belt. All of them had confirmed the same finding — this baby was *not* what it seemed to be.

Hawking had played a mean game of billiards with Sol's family jewels as it screamed sunward. The goddam planets had *rocked* when Hawking slid by them. Mars lost Phobos and Deimos permanently; they're out there now, trying to solve the N-body problem by trial and error.

The Moon got nudged pretty hard when the singularity intersected Earth's orbit. I heard that it played hell with the Terries: weather, agriculture, tides, even the length of day. Several million killed; Paris turned into a beachfront city. Earth was damn lucky to be as far away from Hawking as it was when it passed.

Konstantine Station got tossed like a jackstraw — luckily, I wasn't home at the time. Lots of injuries and a couple of deaths, and several months of correcting burns to get back to L-5.

Yeah, the crew of *Wildcatter* had heard all about Hawking, long before we had caught up with it inside Venus's orbit. But all of that info was in our *heads* during that final approach of ours, and we were staring at something that our *intuition* told us was no big deal. Then Hawking had cast its vote, and we were suddenly on a slip-sliding trajectory *down* at over 0.8 gees. Son of a bitch, that was a scary landing.

I don't know how well a full-auto system would have handled the landing. We all spent a lot of time kicking *that one* around during lounge time afterward.

"Bullshit!" was Cal Bartley's summary then. "Goddam Snyder and his goddam credit-pinching nearly bought it for us." Cal always had an irritating habit of being loudmouthed when he was skittish.

Chan Singh shook his head violently.

"And that's *your* bullshit, Bartley," he said. "Full-autos are out of the question on spec ships and you know it."

"Flock ass, Singh!" Cal handled language like a bouncer. "Old Man Snyder has more money than God. He could outfit this tub like the *Constitution* if he cared more for his crew than his pockets."

"Hey I'm no cheerleader for Snyder," Chan said. "But if he did things the way you think he should, we'd all be working for table scraps. He got rich because he *understands* this business, and you'll get rich working for him for the same reason."

"That's easy for you, Singh," Cal shot back. "You've made yours."

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"And I did it working the Old Man's way," Chan said.

"You were always a booklicker for Snyder, Singh," Lou Williams threw in. "The old man's a goddam horse's ass, and this trip proves it. We're each paying a month's expenses, and we'll probably all wind up dead to boot — and for what? So that egomaniac can get his name in the history books trying to broncobust this worthless rock."

"Goddam right," Cal added. "We've got a fortune waiting for us on Titan, and Snyder's got us out here mucking around like *scientists*, for God's sake."

None of the crew, me included, were very happy about prospecting on Hawking. But Chan *was* right. Wildcatting had always been a wing and a prayer proposition, whether in space or in the early oil days in Texas. Speculator's profits were narrow, and that meant cutting corners, taking risks. The industrials had all of the fancy equipment and plush living quarters — and the full-autos.

And they were the ones that went after the big strikes: mining the large asteroids, drilling the huge oil reserves on Mars (or whatever that stuff was they found there). If you wanted to be comfortable, join the industrials. If you wanted adventure, sign onto a spec ship: rotten hours, primitive equipment, spitting daily in the Reaper's eye and hoping he didn't spit back. Everyone, including Cal Bartley, knew that when he signed on. I couldn't side with Cal on that account.

I knew that Cal, like most of us, was intimidated by Snyder, and this was just his way of puffing up. Cal had already been with the drilling crew for more than two years when I joined on, and he was a full-timer too. I had heard that the Old Man had jettisoned him at least twice in the past for being insubordinate, but he hired him back both times. Cal was the best tool dresser to be had.

Snyder had this thing about his employees. He seemed to think that we had joined the Marines when we signed on. Of course, once you got on ship, there wasn't a hell of a lot you could do about that. Snyder *was* commander-in-chief there, and emperor and Christ-almighty-God too.

There was a story going around when I first signed on that the Old Man had *really* spaced a driller once who had pushed him too hard. No one knew for sure if that story was true or just an invention of Snyder's to keep us in line. In any case, it worked. None of us doubted that Snyder was capable of doing just that.

It was because of the Old Man's ways that I never became a full-timer myself on the *Wildcatter*. You had to be a hard case, or awfully desperate, to put up with his crap, and I was neither. But Snyder paid well — a lot better than any of the other spec ship owners. And I have to admit his single-mindedness had made him the most successful independent in the business.

Snyder did have a few good points. His vessels were all spaceworthy. The

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crew quarters were warm and the life systems were doubly redundant. Even he understood that hungry, cold, or dead people don't work very hard.

Why did we do it? For most it was the money. A contract on the *Wildcatter* paid a 3% share of discovery, less expenses, to every man and woman in a crew of twenty. And it didn't matter if you were a pilot or a scrub-downer. That was better by tenths than the other independents offered. And like I said, the *Wildcatter* had a good record.

Hell, there were a handful of people around living damn fine after just one tour on board her. I'm talking about the crew who discovered that two-ton nugget of molybdenum hiding in the Belt, of course. That was before I joined. In fact, it was during one of Cal's enforced absences. I don't think Cal ever forgave Snyder for doing that to him.

Old Man Snyder could have cashed it all in then and been set for life. But he just used the credits to outfit five more *Wildcatters* and went straight back out again. The stylized wildcat symbol on the hulls of Wildcatter Corporation ships became recognized throughout the system. I don't know if it was greed or escape that kept him out there. Generally, no one got a chance to ask him about it. He pretty much stayed to himself in his private module when we weren't on a work site.

Anyway, if landing on Hawking was your idea of lucky, *Wildcatter* earned her reputation for being at the right place at the right time this time out. Just a month earlier we had come home dry after nearly a year of prospecting around Saturn. But I was convinced, and I had convinced Snyder, that the ay-eye had discovered a liquid biomass lurking beneath the sludge on Titan. He was determined to go back and have another look. The Martian "oil" uncovered by the crew of the I. S. Exxon the year before had turned out to be a previously unknown hydrosilicon, and Exxon's labbies back at L-5 were feverishly analyzing the implications.

The Old Man had guarded his claim like a hungry mongrel. He ordered *Wildcatter IV* outfitted with armaments and sent her out to stand guard. We had to station-keep out there for four months before she showed up to relieve us. All of us were bone tired and just plain sick of free fall when we finally got home. But to a person, everyone signed on to ship back out as soon as *Wildcatter* could be refitted for drilling. None of us wanted to lose our stake on *that* find. So there we were, scrubbed, dry, and smiling, and about to set sail from Konstantine for the Big Belted Beauty, when the Japanese survey data on Hawking came in.

> *Extra-solar in origin. Anomalous lack of axial rotation. Unusual heavy metal composition. Bore samples indicate hot central core surrounded by multiple accretion layers built up over extremely long intervals. Age between 10 and 15 billion years. Tectonics of significant proportions, likely driven by extremely dense object at cen-*

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ter surrounded by liquid mantle. Probable candidate: Hawking singularity. Hypothesis consistent with mass, size, gravitational and tidal effects, temperature, age, and interstellar origin. Hypothesis inconsistent with stability of solid material surrounding object, and with apparently slow accumulation of accreted material. No resolution at present.

There it was, a quantum black hole! A tiny — and damn heavy — cinder of nothing left over from the original fireworks. It was that Japanese survey report that gave Hawking its name.

The Old Man was on the bridge reviewing the prelaunch checklist when the news came in. McRae told us that he had just stood there, eyes flicking back and forth across the infoscreen, absorbing the report. His jowls were set, the cigar smoldered in his mouth, nothing showed on his face. He removed the cigar and stared at the ashes for a couple of seconds.

Then he turned to McRae and said, "File a flight plan for Hawking," and left the bridge.

We all got pissed when we heard the news. A lot of ships and a lot of crew-hours have been wasted nosing around the asteroid belt hoping to find one of these microscopic buggers hiding there. No one knew for sure that they *existed*, though the theorists had predicted them over seventy years ago. It wasn't just scientific curiosity that sent all those people on a snipe hunt. If a quantum hole could be dragged back to Earth orbit, the Terries would have a power source that would allow them to air-condition the African continent. There were even persistent rumors that several countries were trying to *synthesize* one of the damn things.

But wasn't it just like Mama Nature to finally confirm the theories by grandstanding. Nothing for seventy years, and then the Big Mutha of quantum holes comes by to say hello at 170 decibels. The problem was there was no way to slow down Hawking, let alone to cart if off to Earth. The singularity itself, hiding in the middle of his spaceborne haystack, was probably only a centimeter or so in diameter. But it massed at several billion trillion tons — it weighed more than Mars — and with the amount of momentum it packed, it could have carried Earth off with it.

I suppose something that old, that massive, and that had spent its lifetime wandering around the universe might have picked up some interesting lint in its coat. None of the survey probes had been equipped for more than shallow surface samples. My belief then and now is that Snyder got obsessed with being the first one to find out if anything was hidden in its pockets. It's the only reason I can come up with to explain why he suddenly abandoned a certain gold mine for this risky, dangerous, and low-probability venture. Maybe he was a visionary, though we mostly thought he was just crazy. He certainly didn't make any points with the crew — and he didn't start out

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with many in the bank.

So we got there. Not just the first ones, but the only ones. None of the industrials could be redirected so quickly. None of the other spec ships were prepared. And no one had much time to act. Frankly, I'm not sure that any of the other commercial rigs even gave a damn — Hawking had been regarded pretty much as a scientific curiosity from the start.

Hawking had shown enough good manners to arrive more or less in-plane, so rendezvous was possible for a ship of our class. But the singularity wasn't staying around for long. It was hustling toward Sol on a hyperbolic, gathering speed as it fell, and there would only be a few weeks at the outside when the surface temperature would be within *Wildcatter*'s limits. We'd have just enough time to jump aboard, take a long sip with our straw, and get the hell out again.

Maybe someone could have caught up with it on the downhill side after perihel, but apparently no one tried. The colony of Rockheads out in the Belt took nearly a direct hit on the outbound pass, but I figured most of them went scrambling for cover. A body of that mass, nudging the planets around like it did, made predicting its orbit a little dicey. I don't know of any other outfit but ours that had the combination of speed, maneuverability, tools, and just plain rotten luck of being in position to reach her. I was just hoping that Hawking wasn't filled with Confederate dollar bills.

We had the drilling site set up within six hours.

On the day of the accident, we had been over the drill site for about a hundred hours. We had two teams working twelve-hour shifts around the clock, and the strain was just beginning to get to us. The tidal shear was making everyone dizzy, and the damned asteroid was earthquaking every few minutes. Not only were we stumbling around and bumping into one another, but *Wildcatter*'s hull screeched and moaned constantly. We had a hell of a time concentrating.

The site was set up directly beneath the ship itself. We had the shield walls down to keep the sun out and the atmosphere in, which added claustrophobia to the rest of our problems. But at least that way we only wore insul-skin while we worked, which was a lot more pliable than the vacuum suits. I know it sounds like I am rationalizing, but it wasn't the easiest assignment we had ever pulled.

The accident was Pat Talbot's fault, no question about that. I have to give her credit, though; she never made any excuses. She knew what she was doing, and she should have known better. Cal, McRae, Singh and all the rest had a dozen theories later to explain Pat's mistake. I have a few ideas of my own.

This was Pat's first tour on the *Wildcatter*. She had signed on with us at Konstantine Station, just after the news of Hawking came in. She had the credentials of an experienced tool dresser; Bartley had checked her out himself before he hired her on as his assistant. The Old Man had insisted on a second dresser

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on this crew because of the amount of drilling we would likely be facing.

No one else on board had ever met her before, though that was not especially unusual. She was reasonably good looking, in an unglamorous sort of way. None of us were much to look at, not while on tour. I guessed her age to be around forty. Her hair was mostly the color of ground coffee, though she had tipped the ends white in sort of a keyboard pattern. She wore it thick on top and cut close to her neck, like most spacer women did. Long hair tended to get in the way of things in free fall, and couldn't be kept neat anyway. Her face was ok — standard issue Anglo and no imbedded cosmetics.

I could tell that she had a nice body under her jump suit, and that had become more important to me as we coasted sunward on our intercept ellipse. This was the first time we had shipped with only one female crew member in as long as I could remember. Space tours, like long business trips spent in hotel rooms, produced horniness exponentially. I've always believed it was something they put in the air conditioning.

Shipboard sexism died a hasty death when commercial space ops started, even if it is still alive and breathing on Terra and her children. But body chemistry isn't suspended in space. I was hoping that Pat's air conditioning was having the same effect on her as mine was on me.

Pat seemed to be a pleasant person too. She was friendly enough on duty and during lounge time, though I don't remember her talking about herself much. She spoke well. Though many of the crew had advanced degrees, education had been grafted onto her and had flourished. I relished having an intelligent conversation after hearing Bartley body-slam the language all day.

I hadn't had a chance to talk with her before we collided with Hawking, and we had been busy as hell since. It wasn't until the night before the accident that I happened on her alone and not on duty. I had come down to the galley several hours after the end of my shift to scrounge up some caffeine and carbohydrates. The galley was usually deserted at that hour; I liked having one snack a day in privacy.

Pat was sitting by herself at one of the tables, sorting intently through some stuff she had dumped out of a large plastic box; she didn't hear me come in. It was hard to hear anything over the constant grinding and screeching of *Wildcatter*'s hull being assaulted by solar wind and tidal shear. I spoke to her as I crossed over to the coffee dispenser.

"Hello," I said, trying not to startle her.

She turned toward me in sort of a twisting motion, shoulders first, head reluctantly following, and eyes finally dragged along. It looked like the upper body motion in a golf swing, and for exactly the same reason.

"Oh, hi," she said. "You're Clarence, um, Stroemann?"

She was being polite, though she clearly was preoccupied with what she had been doing.

"Mowboata," I said. "Clarence Mowboata. You're thinking of Nick

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Stroemann, the drill suction operator. I only do surveys."

She smiled at me and shifted the rest of the way around in my direction. I was encouraged.

"Glad to meet you — again — Clarence Mowboata." Her eyes widened in acceptance.

I came over to her table and leaned against the edge, facing her. I wanted to be close enough to detect any pupil dilation; it's important to read the signs early in this dance.

She offered her hand. "I'm Pat —"

"Talbot," I finished. I shook her hand gently. "It was easier for me to keep you straight. What is it that keeps you so fascinated?" I gestured toward the odd assortment of rocks that were scattered on the table.

They were a jumble of shapes and sizes, all dull gray. Several were split in two or sheared at angles, and the exposed facets had an oily luster. A geologist's mallet and chisel lay nearby. Pat looked back at them, almost exactly reversing her earlier motion.

"Well. . . I'm not sure exactly what these are. Hawking's nail clippings, I suppose."

"Hawking's. . . ?" My focus shifted to the rocks. I reached over and picked up one the size of a walnut. It was deceptively heavy.

"You picked these up here?"

She nodded and reached for one of the larger ones that had been cut.

"We drilled them out yesterday, actually. I found them in the effluent filter. They are each peculiar in their own way. I thought that we might get some clues that the assayer ay-eye missed."

I put down the first rock, and she handed the second one to me. I turned it over and studied the cleft face. It was a deep steel gray and was sealed with a natural transparent glaze. It felt dry and smooth like the inside surface of a shell. There were some imperfections in the underlying grayness; small yellow beads of what looked like fused glass were imbedded at random. They were multifaceted little stones, spheres made up of flat hexagonal planes — like miniature soccer balls. Their color shifted in hue perceptibly as I stared at them. There appeared to be some natural luminescence in the impurities. Crystalline sulfur compounds fused in muscovite, most likely, with a few phosphors stirred in. An unusual specimen, but probably not very interesting if the ay-eye had ignored it. I said so and handed it back to her.

"Mmm," was her reply, then she said, "What do you know about quantum holes, naked singularities — that sort of stuff?"

"Things my mother never told me," I said.

She didn't react.

"Sorry," I said. "I don't know much. We covered that in advanced cosmology I think. But there was this cute undergrad named Phyllis who sat next to me in that class — I was into the two-body problem that semester. I saw the

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stuff that was on the vidpress when Hawking was discovered."

She turned the stone over in her hand and stared at the face with the little yellow soccer balls.

"There has been a lot of speculation about them," she said. "Physical laws inside of one are totally different."

"Yeah, so I've heard," I replied. I was getting a little bored with this subject, and there were only five hours left in my off-shift.

"Listen," I said, "I've been hoping I'd get a chance to meet you like this." I've always had success with the direct approach.

"And things can get *out* too," she said. She hadn't been listening.

"Out too, hum?" I said half-heartedly.

"Yes," she said. "A lot of people think stuff only falls *into* black holes — like the rabbit hole in *Alice in Wonderland*. But with microholes like Hawking, the Mad Hatter can pack up his tea party and pay *us* a visit. Anything can come popping out of one — our laws don't even make sense in there."

This wasn't going well. I tried another approach.

"Naked singularities, big bangs, black holes: cosmology uses a lot of sexual symbolism, doesn't it?"

At least she smiled a little when she answered. "I think you're pushing it a bit," she said.

"Come on, encourage me," I said. "Can't we find something friendlier to talk about than a wind of improbability that comes whistling up a rabbit hole."

"*Very* impressive," she said. She paused a long time, and then she said, "I suppose you've earned a change of topics — in return for being so poetic."

This was going better. If only I hadn't said what I did next. I never did know when to quit.

"Besides, I think if those rocks were the keys to fantasyland, the ay-eye would have been the first to know."

Her pupils contracted.

"You keep bowing to that ay-eye," she said. "Which one has the true artificial intelligence, you or that program?"

Shit! I thought. I knew I had blown it and should try to recover. But that crack had pissed me off.

"That program is my *tool*," I said. "I underestimated it several times early on, and it cost me dearly. Believe me, it knows what it is doing."

"It infers from its knowledge base," she said. "How can it be qualified to judge the unknowable? That's one of the few remaining conceits of human beings."

"It has *very* extensive knowledge. There is probably no human expert that could match its abilities in this field. I suppose that in the interest of being human I should ignore it and go back to my calculator."

"You aren't using it, you're *deferring* to it."

"I'll bet you're one of those 'no computer in grade-school math' fanatics,

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too," I said.

"As a matter of fact I *am*. I happen to think it's *important* for people to learn the *why* of things first, before they learn just *how* — like automatons."

"If we all thought like you," I said, "we'd still be sharpening wooden sticks so we would go hunt down dinner."

"Don't resort to outrageous statements," she snapped. "It makes you sound like you're grasping at straws."

She was right: I was, but I felt outraged.

"And what makes *you* an expert on geology, quantum holes, and artificial intelligence?" I shot at her. "Aren't those hobbies a bit unusual for a tool dresser?"

"They're *not* hobbies," was all she said. She turned her eyes back toward those damn rocks, and she fell silent.

I realized what I had done and I felt foolish.

"Pat," I said, trying to sound apologetic.

Nothing.

"Uh, I was thinking of queuing up a movie in the lounge. Would you like to join me for Bogie, Bacall, and buttered popcorn?"

She waved her hand a little in my direction. "No thanks," she said. She didn't look up. She had started chiseling away at another of the stones.

I stood there for probably two minutes, but she never seemed to notice me again. I had to hand it to her, the woman had concentration. Finally, I gave up and left.

An hour later, after I had climbed into my bunk to get what sleep I could, I was still mentally replaying my blunder.

Not hobbies?

Pat was dressing the drill casing as I slid down from the crew quarters next morning at change of shift. I called out a "good morning" to her, but she couldn't hear me over the racket. Four solid days of boring with white-hot plasma had not made much of a dent in Hawking's coat. But it was beating the crap out of the drill.

In the early wildcatting days on Earth, a steel drill was raised by winch up a tall wooden tower erected over the hole, then released to let gravity slam it into the dirt. The crew just raised and dropped it, raised and dropped it, slowly digging a well to the oil. The process was time-consuming and tedious, and drill bits wore out quickly. The tool dresser was the person who stood by with a sledgehammer when the drill was withdrawn from the bore hole. He'd examine the bit and hammer the cutting edge back into shape when it got dull.

In space 'catting, a plasma gun had replaced the drill bit. The working end of the gun was surrounded by a double-shelled foreskin made of a ceramic alloy. The inner shell provided a magnetic focal ring for the plasma stream, and the slag was carried away by a suction between the inner and

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outer shells. The stuff we drilled through, and the energies we pumped, could distort the hell out of that foreskin.

The really expensive rigs had self-correcting nozzles. But, like I said, this was a speculation ship, so we still carried our own tool dressers. On *Wildcatter* they were Cal and Pat, though they, like the rest of us, had several jobs on board. Their "sledgehammer" was a laser dressing tool — sort of a miniature version of the plasma gun — that they used to keep the nozzle trimmed and open. And in Texas or on Hawking, the tool dresser's first commandment was the same: *never* do any work over the hole. A gee is a gee, as they say, and the only thing that must go into a well is a drill.

Anyway, as I came down through the access port into the work area, I saw Pat break that commandment. Proper dressing of the gun required that it be partially disassembled so that it could be swung out and away from the hole. It is a lot of work, and a pain in the ass. I have seen a couple of dressers in my time take a short cut and just slide the dressing tool out over the hole and under the plasma gun instead. That way they could get at the nozzle without taking the gun apart first. This is the first time I saw one not get away with it.

The dressing-tool cart was balanced on its rear wheels at the edge of the four-foot-diameter drill hole. The rest of the cart was suspended over the hole, the front wheels dangling over a thousand feet of nothing. Pat had managed to partially cover the opposite edge of the hole with a slab of heavy metal — it looked like a short section of shield wall material — and that provided just enough of a ledge to support the front lip of the cart. Pat stood on the slab like a shapely Atlas, legs spread wide, straddling the hoses and lines, and was lasing the nozzle tip suspended directly over her head.

Cal came sliding down right behind me, and when he saw what she was doing, he was immediately pissed. He shouted at her in that booming voice he had developed from years of working around noise. I saw her jerk her head down to look at him, and then she lost her balance. Instinctively, she kicked off of the slab to keep from falling into the hole. The slab shifted, the cart tumbled, and *Wildcatter* lost an essential, and irreplaceable, tool down a 300-meter throat of rock.

All of us froze. Even Bartley was speechless. We stood there, not knowing what to say, staring like morons at that black, earthy mouth in the floor. Williams and Chan and several other members of the B-shift crew came on duty, and as soon as they took in what had happened, they stopped their early morning chatter. All of us had been around rigs long enough to understand what this meant.

Finally, the Old Man slid down to start his change of shift inspection. It took him only seconds to understand, and he was the first one to break the silence.

"Get it out," he grunted. That was all. He didn't even glance at Pat. No frowns, no recriminations. Just that short command directed to all of us,

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then he turned and disappeared back up the ladder.

We all jumped as if we had been goosed. We knew we were in trouble. McRae had computed that we had a week, maybe two weeks at the outside, before Hawking's velocity carried us too close to the sun for us to stay. After our first day of drilling we had known it was going to be tight, since whatever Hawking was made of was not particularly intimidated by our plasma drill.

The boring of the hole had been going very slowly, and we were having to dress the tool much more frequently than usual. Our chances of tapping into Hawking's veins before the sun turned us into prune juice weren't very good at best. Now we had two new problems: a plugged well and an unreachable tool. There was no time to start a new well and no way to get very far without a dressing tool. We had to retrieve it, and in working order, or we might just as well lift off right then — which seemed like a better choice to most of us.

Everyone pitched in. Both crews stayed on the rest of the shift, and more members of second shift came on early as word of what had happened reached them. We spent the first hour or so puzzling about ways to get at the cart. Of course, the first thing we tried was pulling it back up by its long power cable that trailed up from the well and tied into the primary power source in the ship. But a little tugging there, and we knew that was hopeless. The cart had managed to wedge itself tightly in the rough throat of the well, and Cal insisted that we leave the power cord alone. He was worried that we'd damage the tool beyond repair if the cable ripped out its guts, so we dropped that idea.

We spent most of the first day lowering hooks on long chains, but we couldn't get them to engage anything that gave us much support. We hooked the cart handle first and immediately yanked it right off of the cart. Murphy had been working overtime against us. Not only had the cart lodged upside down, wheel and flat base upward, but when Pat jumped, the metal slab had shifted and fallen down there as well. It had wedged itself obliquely over the cart, and there just wasn't very much exposed that we could get a hook around. We wasted a lot of hours with those damned hooks before we finally realized they just weren't going to work.

The Old Man came down again at the end of the shift. He didn't say a word to us after that first time. He just walked past us to the hole, cigar smoldering in his mouth, and shaded his eyes to look down past the flood lights we had rigged over it. He saw we weren't getting anywhere, so he turned away and went back up to his cabin.

We went at it like that for three days: experimenting, huddling in twos and threes for ideas, sketching out and discarding all sorts of Rube Goldberg contraptions. Every member of the crew was giving it his full attention — Pat most of all. I'm sure that she must have gotten some sleep, but she was down there every time I came onto the site, and she was always there after I

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left. And I put in a *lot* of hours.

Somewhere along the way, the mood of the crew had shifted too. Getting at that friggin' dressing tool had become a team goal now, and you could sense the feeling of shared responsibility and participation growing stronger every hour that we worked at it. Everyone chipped in an idea, and I don't recall that anyone's opinion was dismissed out of hand by the rest of us. Someone would suggest an approach, and we'd all stand around sounding it out, weighing its chances, and sometimes giving it a try. Then, as each attempt failed, we all regrouped and brainstormed some more.

Many times when I think back on that week I spent on Hawking, I feel that, in some ways, it was the most enjoyable tour I have served. Some very close relationships were cemented there; people who before had been no more than coworkers have become friends that I still value, and attend to, to this day. Several other members of that crew have expressed the same feelings to me since then.

In the end, though, it was Pat herself who came up with the answer. Early on that fourth day someone — it may have been Nick Stroemann, the suction operator from Crew One — had rigged up a makeshift electromagnet. We all got excited about this idea and worked like hell getting it suspended from a pulley and lowered into the well. It worked great too, except it couldn't budge the damn slab, and we couldn't angle it around the slab to slap it onto the tool housing. We fished all over that well with the magnet, guiding it remotely using the fiber optics monitor that we had lowered down there the third day, but it just wasn't going to work.

Everyone was feeling pretty low by then. It was like being stopped on the five-yard line with time running out.

Then Pat shouted, "I've got an idea!" and all of us dropped dead-silent and looked at her. It was the most animated I had seen her since the accident. I'll always remember that glow of joy on her face as she beamed back at us.

"Pull the magnet back out of there," she said, "and let's turn on the dresser."

We just looked at one another, not understanding what she meant to do. But she just turned off the magnet's power switch that Stroemann had rigged and that dangled from a cantiliver near the nozzle of the plasma drill. Stroemann grabbed the chain that snaked over the pulley and pulled the magnet out of the pit. Pat saw it come clear and then turned toward the monitor screen. She slowly returned power to the dresser tool. As soon as the orange pencil of pure energy appeared, I understood what she was doing. The tool's barrel was pointed generally up the well, in the direction of the metal slab. The beam flecked over one corner of the plate, and we saw it shift color, bubble, and then vaporize.

I grabbed one of the grappling hooks and shouted at Pat to switch off the dresser. She did, and I lowered the hook back down the hole, then swung it

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and jiggled it past the newly cut gap in the slab. I fished for the dresser tool, guiding myself by the monitor screen, and saw the hook loop around one of the legs of the cart.

"You can't pull it up with that," Williams shouted at me.

But I just shook my head and gave a few tugs on the chain. After a couple of tries, I managed to rotate the dresser a few degrees so that the beam's aim was shifted. Pat saw what I was up to, and she immediately flipped on the power again. Another section of slab melted away.

I heard a loud cheer and looked up to see that everyone was standing around us now. Their eyes were jumping back and forth from the monitor to the hole as Pat and I now ran off our final series of downs. I twisted the tool a little farther; she powered it on and burned away more of the blockage. Once she burned through the chain holding the hook, and I tumbled backward as the chain snapped free. There was a bit of snickering as I landed on my ass. We had the end in sight now, and the mood had improved considerably.

Before I could stand up, Chan Singh had already lowered another hook into place and was signaling for Pat to turn on the power. I stood back, unceremoniously thrust into the role of spectator, and grinned. I saw movement to one side of me and saw that the Old Man had slipped into the work area unnoticed. He was standing silently, arms hanging loose at his sides, and a thin streamer of white smoke was ascending from the tip of his cigar.

I heard Pat shout, "I got it!" and everyone, except the Old Man, let out another cheer. With no words between them, Chan jerked the hook back out of the hole, and Stroemann powered up the electromagnet. He lowered it, hand over hand, until we all heard the *snap* as it kissed the metal slab — now sundered. Stroemann tugged, and we could hear and see the section of slab break free from the wall of the well. Stroemann wheeled up the cable and the jagged fragment appeared at the lip of the hole. Several hands reached out to grab it.

Another cheer — we could all smell touchdown now. The magnet dropped out of sight again, and the other section of slab was free. Pat called for Chan to lower the hook onto the cart, and he did, snagging it easily the first time. I grabbed another hook and lowered it from the opposite side of the hole. Chan and I stood there like ice fisherman, with a catch too big to lose, and too heavy to reel in. Then Stroemann dropped the magnet so that it *snicked* onto the dresser cart. The three of us began to pull, slowly, and very carefully, and the cart shifted in the monitor. Several others grabbed one or the other of our chains, and we all tugged together. Someone began to chant, "Go, go, go," and we all joined in.

Finally, and grudgingly, Hawking's throat disgorged its unwelcome lodger. Pandemonium broke loose. People were clapping, cheering, crying all at once. I hugged Chan and Stroemann and I guess just about everyone else in the crew. You would have thought we had just won the Super Bowl.

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We all went crazy, and Pat just stood off to the side with a big grin on her face and tears streaming down her cheeks.

The Old Man let us carry on like that for maybe a couple of minutes, and then he slowly worked his way through the circle of bodies and stood near the edge of the hole. As soon as we became aware of him standing there, we quieted down. In a minute we were standing around with stupid grins on our faces, holding our breaths, and waiting to see what the Old Man would say.

He reached out and lightly touched the dresser cart, still hanging like a misshapen fruit from the end of the electromagnet. With a sudden chill, I realized that no one had thought to get it down from over the hole. I saw a couple of heads jerk involuntarily, and I knew that thought was belatedly making the rounds. But with Snyder standing there, none of us were too anxious to move. He slowly looked at each of us, meeting each pair of eyes, challenging us. Then finally he turned toward Pat.

"Talbot," he said, still staring at her, "come here."

Pat looked at him uncertainly and hesitated. She let the smile melt from her mouth, and she wiped at her cheeks with the back of her hand. I saw her tense up as she crossed the space to where the Old Man waited. When she was next to him, he said nothing at first, just continued to look at her through that wispy veil that rose from his cigar. When he finally did speak, it was almost a whisper.

"Look at this dressing tool, Talbot. Take a good look. Do you see what your carelessness has caused?"

He raised his hand and touched the edge of the cart.

"I want you to have this dresser, Talbot. I'll make it a gift to you as soon as we are finished here. You keep it as a souvenir, a reminder of your incompetence."

Pat was glassy-eyed now. She said nothing and didn't move.

"Because, Talbot," the Old Man continued, "you will get nothing else from me for this job. You are fired. If you can afford to pay, I'll sell you passage back to Konstantine. If not, find your own way back. And I promise you this. You will never work for this or any other outfit again."

The rest of us were dumbfounded, unbelieving. The camaraderie had changed to outrage. I looked at Pat, searching for a reaction. But she stood staring at the Old Man, soundlessly.

And then, in a single motion that must have taken seconds, but that seemed endless, she raised her right hand toward the power switch for the electromagnet. Her fingers lingered there for a moment, and she said just two words.

"Fuck you."

She turned off the power. I watched the dresser cart plunge out of sight back down the well, and I heard a stomach-churning crunch.

Snyder's cigar dropped from his mouth and followed the cart. I never saw

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a look like that on his face before. He was catatonic. Pat turned from him and walked away.

Her movement seemed to shake Snyder from his trance. He became aware that all of us were staring at him; his eyes narrowed, and he glared at us in turn. Then he looked at Pat, who had reached the bottom of the ladder. He started to say something to her, hesitated, and turned toward me instead.

"Mowboata, you're in charge of getting that dresser tool back out," he snapped. "I want it out by end of shift."

He turned to go after Pat.

"No," I said quietly. There was a gasp from several members of the work crew. Pat was nearly up the ladder now, and I saw her glance back at me when I spoke.

Snyder was frozen where he stood. He looked at me, uncomprehending, as though witnessing a breakdown in natural law. A member of *his crew* had actually refused an order. I shied from the open fury of his stare, turned my back, and walked away from him. Behind me, I heard the sound of tools being dropped, and of shuffling feet, but not even a faint murmur of a human voice.

I folded my arms across my chest and turned around again to face him. I found that nearly half the work crew had joined me. The others were standing immobilized like statues, as if some slight movement might shatter the fragile shell of restraint and invite destruction upon all of us.

Snyder's eyes had glazed over. Every filament of muscle in his neck, face, and arms was stretched tight like a cobra ready to strike. His fists were balled into hammers, and his chest was rising and falling with shallow breaths. We were transfixed in a tableau that might explode in an instant.

It was Pat who released us. She started climbing again and disappeared through the access hatch. Snyder saw the movement and turned toward the ladder. He looked back once in my direction, and there was loathing in his face. Then he scrambled up the ladder and left us alone.

We stood around looking at each other for a while, making nervous noises. I had a gut-twisting like I had just been told I had only days to live — which might not have been too far wrong. I had to get away from the work site; I decided to go after Pat. She wasn't in her cabin when I got there.

An hour later the word came down from the Old Man.

"Stow up and lift off."

So we did. It took several hours to stow, and I spent as much time as I could searching for Pat. Williams said he thought Snyder had summoned her to his cabin. No one had seen her since.

I went back to her cabin just before lift off, and it had been emptied out, though a few personal belongings were still there. She had apparently taken her rocks with her too. I couldn't find them, and no one on the crew even knew what I was talking about when I asked around.

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Singh had thought to check the lifeboats, and sure enough one was missing. One of them could hold three people, and they were designed for a few weeks survival at most. Being alone, and conserving her supplies, Pat could stretch that quite a bit, but it wouldn't do her much good. The boats didn't have enough delta-vee to escape from Hawking, and they sure couldn't withstand being this close to the Sun for very long. I got really sick, and mostly stayed in my cabin until we lifted off.

Two hours later we were burning away from Hawking. It disappeared toward Sol with Pat Talbot astride it and with its mysteries intact. We had scooped out a couple of tons of its surface, which would no doubt be of interest to the scientists. But the Science Salvage Act guaranted the *Wildcatter* crew would get little financial reward for that. The venture had been a bust for the Old Man — and none of us were losing any tears for him. Snyder never mentioned his missing assistant tool dresser again.

That was the last time that I served on a Snyder ship. When we got back to Konstantine, the Old Man fired most of us, and more than half of the rest resigned. I had a hell of a time getting work on any of the other spec ships for a long time afterward. The Old Man saw to that.

It took Snyder almost a month to sign a fresh crew. His find on Titan was the biggest one yet, but I never regretted losing my share. That was nearly five years ago, and for a long, long time I couldn't think about Pat Talbot without hurting a little inside. But I thought it was over — until yesterday.

Yesterday, I got this anonymous packet in my electronic mail. The packet was composed of three linked files, and there was no note or other explanation attached. It had been netted to me from somewhere here on Konstantine Station, and the sender's I.D. had been deleted.

The first file was a clipping that had been extracted from one of the online weekly news publications. It was dated almost a year ago.

> *Tel Aviv 09/22/48 (UPI): Scientists at Israel's Ben Gurion Institute announced today that, after several years of research, they have successfully synthesized a quantum black hole . . . Institute Director, Dr. Mohinder Chopra, stated that the breakthrough had come as a result of unexpected recent discoveries about the properties of these mysterious microscopic objects.*
>
> *In a related development, U.S. Senator Gary Smith (R. Texas) today called for immediate international sanctions against Israel. "Tel Aviv's attempt to monopolize the technology of the quantum black hole must be thwarted," Senator Smith was quoted as saying. "There can be little doubt that this 'breakthrough' came as a result of illegal acquisition of discoveries from one of the independent speculator ships, yet another example of Israel's open disregard for the Science Salvage Act."*

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The second file was a prospectus for Wolfman Discoveries, Inc., a privately held trading corporation based in Geneva that had been formed only two years ago. The company's primary business seemed to be derived from an exclusive, and classified, contract with Ben Gurion Institute. The company's officers were not identified. The prospectus included a formal offering allowing me to buy shares in the company.

The third file was a high resolution visual image. It was a photograph extracted from an old magazine, maybe *National Geographic*. It showed a dead animal, its leg crushed in a steel vice trap, its body horribly mutilated. The animal was one of those cats that used to roam the U.S. western plains — a puma or couger. A wildcat!

Jesus, she *is* alive! Somehow, impossibly, she made it back — and she's coming after the Old Man. I don't know how she did it, or why she's decided to let me in on this, but I'm not fool enough to bet against her again.

Today, I sold my condo and bought ten thousand shares of Wolfman. ❁

SF CLICHÉS IV: SPACE MERCENARIES

The mercenary soldier takes his pay
And saves the sum of things for someone else;
Counts up the butcher's bill and goes away.
His contract states he never stays, nor tells
Who hired him, what the local rules allowed,
The foe, or what the reason might have been,
So signed, so sealed, so lawfully endowed,
A paper shroud to wind an army in.
He says things must be so. Perhaps they must.
A war's a war; a fight's by God a fight:
It profits nothing to be fair, nor just,
Or cloud the brain with thoughts of who was Right.
For bombs and bullets say just what they mean:
Of politics, at least, his hands are clean.

— John M. Ford

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FUGUE

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch
art: Hank Jankus

Kristine informs us that she has recently been hired as the editor of Pulphouse: The Hardback Magazine of Dangerous Fiction, *published out of Eugene, Oregon. She also edited, with Dean Wesley Smith, an anthology of short fiction published last year by Hypatia Press.*

Her stories have appeared in Aboriginal SF *and* The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction. *And she is certainly no stranger to* Amazing® Stories*; three of her SF tales have recently been published in our pages: "Skin Deep" (January 1988), "Repository" (July 1988), and "Stained Black" (November 1988).*

The sunlight felt hot against the back of his neck, warming the place where the tingle had been. He crouched, ignoring the odor of rotting food that wafted to him from the dumpster. Her dress had been yellow. As the blood seeped into the threads, the yellow had turned red, dark red, almost black. He thought that the dress would have turned orange. He remembered the lesson so clearly from Mrs. Wilson's art class:

See the wheel of color, children? See how red mixed with white becomes pink . . . with blue, becomes purple . . . with yellow, becomes orange. . . .

He stared at the drying blood and decided that the fabric had not turned black; it had turned purple. Which meant that the dress was blue, not yellow, since everyone knew that blood was red.

He closed his eyes and rubbed them, digging his knuckles into the lids until the pupils throbbed. Even though the tingling had disappeared, he felt odd. His vision had blurred again. He had tried to see the world as everyone had taught him to, and he had failed.

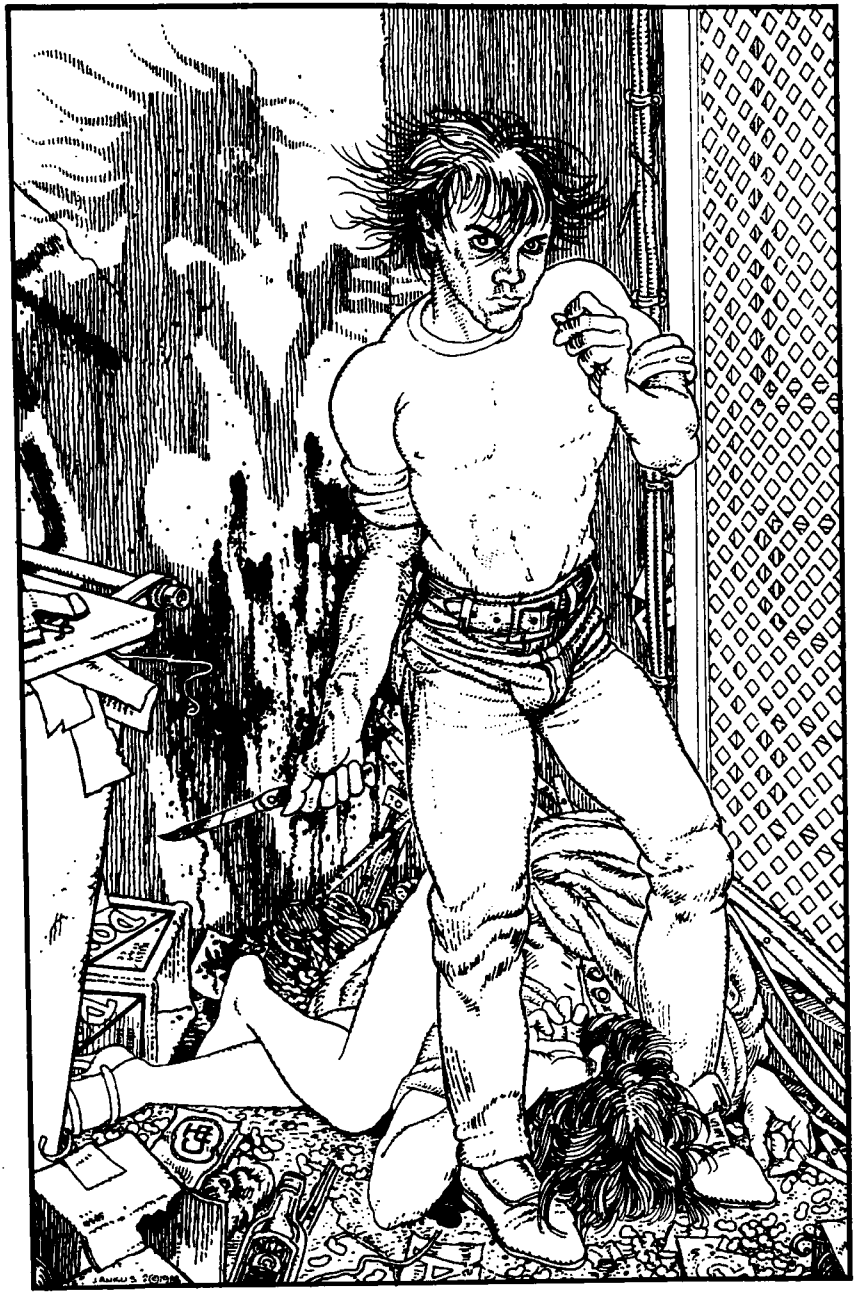
Sara picked up the puppy and felt his hot, slimy tongue slurp at her chin. She moved her face, but the puppy followed, licking and wriggling in her arms. God, she hated dogs, but this one — a high-strung terrier pup to replace the sedate, elderly Josephine — was Mr. Bassinger's joy. She set the animal down.

"He's wonderful, Mr. Bassinger," she said.

The old man smiled. He put his hand down, and the puppy ran to him, shoving its muzzle into his palm. "Sometimes I think he's too much for me."

"Nonsense," she said. "He's perfect. You were getting too lonely after

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Josephine died."

Mr. Bassinger rubbed the pup's ears and then looked at Sara. "You want some coffee?"

She nodded, relieved to be back into the ritual. Mr. Bassinger got up and walked to the refrigerator. The puppy sat on the floor and watched. Sara waited until Mr. Bassinger had his back to her before wiping off her chin. The old man opened the overstocked refrigerator — she wondered how much food had spoiled in there — and pulled out a can of coffee. Then he shuffled over to the coffee maker.

He was her favorite patient. All he needed was someone to check on him, to see if he had enough food or needed more medication. She never had to bathe him or lecture him. She checked his pulse and his blood pressure every week to justify her visit, even though the readings were always fine.

He poured water into the coffee maker and flicked it on. Then he sat down across from her. "I love these gadgets," he said as he did every week. "They make everything so easy."

The dog pawed at her leg, and she reached down to scratch the animal's head. He shoved his cold nose into her hand and started licking. She pulled her hand away, then made herself try again. "He's different from Josephine."

"He's young." The coffee maker squealed behind Mr. Bassinger. "The young have life. The old have wisdom. You wait. When he gets to be Josy's age, he'll be wise too."

She looked at the puppy. His mouth was open and his tongue was hanging to one side. When he saw her face, his tail swished against the tile. She looked away before he could jump on her.

Mr. Bassinger snapped his fingers for the dog. "I was going to name him Napoleon, but I thought that wasn't fair. Napoleon without Josephine? — and I didn't want him to have a Waterloo."

Sara nodded, wishing that the coffee would stop dripping so slowly. She hated it when he talked about history. It made her feel stupid. "I put the newspaper on the dining-room table."

The coffee maker finally stopped. Mr. Bassinger reached back, grabbed the pot, and poured the coffee into two white mugs. He added cream and sugar to one and handed it to her. "Tell me what's in it."

She grabbed a spoon out of the jar at the center of the table and stirred the liquid. "I didn't get to read much."

"Another killing up in Fond du Lac, huh?"

He knew her too well, how she hated to talk about that, hated to acknowledge the deaths that were plaguing the county. She had moved to Campbellsport to get away from the fear Chicago had bred into her — and it seemed like the fear followed in the form of random killings that moved from community to community in Fond du Lac County.

"No," she said. "Mayville."

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"They're getting closer, then." He looked at her. His eyes, nearly hidden in his wrinkled flesh, became penetrating. "You could have the entire upstairs."

"Thank you," she said, but didn't turn him down this time. Maybe she would take him up on his offer. Not that an eighty-five-year-old man would provide much protection, but he would be another human being, someone to hear her screams and respond to them, unlike the neighbors in the apartment complex on the edge of town. They stared through her, the single woman in a world filled with couples, as if she were another piece of furniture instead of a human being.

She took a final sip of her coffee and then slid her chair back.

"People to see, places to go," he said for her.

Sara smiled. "Thanks for the coffee."

The puppy tangled himself in her legs as if he were trying to prevent her from leaving. She stepped over him. Mr. Bassinger took her hand. For a moment, she thought he was going to kiss it. "Take care," he said, as he always did. Only this time, his words seemed to mean more than usual.

Seeing the world in three dimensions made her mind ache, but Jaaene forced herself to concentrate. People pushed past her as she hurried back to the alley, to the boy. The people didn't worry her; they saw her as a strangely unattached shadow gliding across the concrete. She was more concerned about the boy.

He intrigued her. She loved the way that she could manipulate his body. She had tried to touch other humans and had failed. They seemed oblivious to her. But her counsel had warned her about that. Bonding with a human that was not receptive would kill her, waste her, since there was no one to absorb her. Humans did not absorb. They were entities unto themselves. But if Jaaene didn't bond, she could get trapped in the shadow form, stuck forever in this world, unable to move or change.

The odor reached her first, the sickly sweet smell of organic death. Immediately, her olfactory system separated the stench into individual scents — the flat smell of carbon monoxide mixed with the tang of carbon dioxide, floating in a sea of oxygen, while the chemicals of rot rose slowly to the surface —

She shook herself free of the thought. The smells told her about this world from her perspective. She needed to experience it from his.

The boy crouched beside the human he had attacked after Jaaene had touched him. That human lay supine, knees spread, scent changing since the body no longer expelled carbon dioxide. The air retained its iron richness.

Jaaene scuttled across the alley, touched the boy's back, and bonded with him, truly becoming his shadow.

Electric, lightning and burning. The jolt ran through him thick and strong like the time his cousin Suzy had him shove a wet finger inside a light

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socket. He turned quickly, but saw no one. For days, it had felt as if someone were watching him, touching the back of his neck with cold fingers. Ever since he had begun his art —

—blood spurting, running across his hands, his knife, her clothing. Decorating the wall like a canvas, his brother's canvas when he reached into a pot and tossed red paint against the whiteness. *It's modern, Ricky*, his brother would say. *True art is random splotches against nothing.* But unlike his brother, Ricky was committing true art, art that used the color of life, blood, running down blank walls —

—what if someone *was* watching him? Soon everyone would know how he had dipped the knife into her chest (dipped? — it had thudded and she let out a weak scream as she tried to pull it out). They would recognize the artist, and the art wouldn't be random anymore. It would bear a signature as surely as if he had traced his name in the rubble.

Tingles started running up his back, across the nape of his neck, into his hair. Tingles that felt like Suzy's fingers the day she had taken him into the barn and made him stand naked in front of her. She used her fingers on him, made him feel hard and strong. Then he shuddered and a white stream, almost as pretty as blood, showered on the hay. Suzy laughed — *See what a mess you made, Ricky?* — and left him alone, like she always left him, even that day a few years later, when he was bigger and he tried to take her back to the barn. She had screamed then and said he wanted to touch her wrong, when all he really wanted was her to touch him and make him shudder, and his family had told him to stay away from her. The family always came when Suzy screamed, but no one protected him. His father used to say that Ricky made his own trouble, and everyone seemed to believe that.

He owed Suzy, though. She had shown him a different kind of art: texture and color, off-white and creamy, with strands of hay poking through, patterned and free, making him hard again, like he was now. Hard and strong. He could feel a shudder building. If he unzipped his pants, he could add white to the red —

The tingling stopped and he looked back. Still no one. But someone. Fear ran through him, and he forgot about the blood and being hard and art. He just knew that if they caught him, they would hurt him. Like TV. Find a body in the alley and they could slap you against their own walls, make their own art with your blood.

Ricky wiped his knife on the lady's skirt (he wished she hadn't screamed; it made him feel bad when she screamed) then shoved his hands in his pocket and grabbed his jacket off the garbage can behind him. He checked the jacket for blood as meticulously as his brother used to check clothes for paint, then slipped the jacket on. There was a tiny diner across the street. He would order some coffee, use their bathroom, and wash his hands, leaving himself clean for the next time, as unspoiled as an unpainted canvas.

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* * *

Mr. Bassinger watched Sara get into her small car. There had been a time when he could have named the car's make, model, and year, but now there seemed to be no point. All the cars looked the same, all the houses looked the same. The next step would be to make all the people look the same.

Sometimes he was glad that he would die soon.

The puppy tugged at his pants. Mr. Bassinger looked down, feeling tired. A young, attractive woman visited his house, a woman he would have touched once, whose body he would have explored between the conversations. He served her coffee and then she left and he felt empty because he knew that to flirt would put her off — he was old, for crissake — and to propose more would ensure that she never visit again.

The dog growled playfully and pulled again at Mr. Bassinger's pants hem. "Don't rip it," he said as he watched. The poor pup. He was old enough to sense Mr. Bassinger's melancholy, but too young to understand how to respond to his moods. Sometimes he missed Josephine so badly that he ached. Funny to miss a dog. But she had been his shadow, his constant companion, for ten years. And when a person reached his age, there weren't many constant companions left.

Mr. Bassinger sighed, picked the newspaper off the dining-room table, and returned to the kitchen. He sat down in front of the coffee maker so that he wouldn't have to move. He would read the paper, memorizing each word, until it was time for lunch. Then he would hope for a few afternoon visitors, and if no one had stopped by three, he would nap until the evening news. What an exciting life he led, there in his clean, large, silent house.

Jaaene molded herself into his shape, trying to measure the sunlight and stretch herself accordingly. He moved so much and so quickly. She was always changing position, afraid that if she were a half-second late, someone would notice.

They were alone on the road. The boy would stand and stick out his thumb every time a car passed. But the cars were rare. Jaaene used the slow time to concentrate. She tried to ignore the smells in the breeze, focusing instead on the way the air moved across her, disturbing the light in little, almost intangible ways.

Her counsel had told her that she had only one way to escape the exile. The judgmentors had told her before they banished her that she would return to her own world with the aid of a human she bonded to. But she could only bond to one, and if that human failed to work with her, she would remain forever an exile in this strange place.

Thick gas fumes, exhaust, the corrosive scent of rusting metal, and overheated plastic filled her as a car approached. *Concentrate*, she thought and blocked the scents. Light glinted off the hood, nearly blinding her, the third

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dimension making her dizzy and disoriented. The boy stood up and she formed herself by his posture, managing to create an appendage at the same time that he stuck out his thumb.

The car pulled over and the boy hurried toward it. For a brief second, her movements did not correspond with his. Fear rushed through her as she tried to imitate him. The boy flapped his lips at the person inside the car. Then he pulled the door open and crawled inside. The interior was shaded and Jaaene had to crawl beside him.

Exiles were never caught, the judgmentors told her. Humans thought the exiles were only shadows. But if a human became conscious of its shadow, the exile would return home to certain death.

Jaaene huddled against the boy who, mercifully, failed to notice her.

Sara bent open her copy of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. She poised her fingers over the piano keys and then stopped. It was nearly midnight. She stared at the notes and then at the floor, trying to imagine the neighbors below. They were probably sleeping, the McCormicks with their two kids and Siamese cats, desperately whittling away the hours until morning and their sedate, routine jobs.

She brought her hands down, and the fugue came to life. The music, so mathematical in its subtle counterpoint and exact rhythm, seemed almost mystical to her. A conversation held in a language too exalted for human understanding, almost as if the music gave voice to the shadows hidden in the corners of the room. She remembered reading in a music history class that some claimed Mozart died because he had touched the gods. But Mozart's music lacked the perfection of Bach. And Bach wrote fugues.

Fugues. They were all she played. *Your battle against the fugue state,* Stephen used to tell her. Finally, she had asked him what he meant. *Fugue state.* He smiled, transforming himself into Stephen the psychologist, the professional she had abandoned in Chicago. *A long period in which the individual appears to be conscious but later has no recollection of her action. It —*

I always remember things, she had said.

Do you? he had asked.

Except when she was playing fugues. Sara, the county nurse, who bathed old people and gave them medication they didn't want, disappeared under Bach's gentle supervision —

Pounding on the door interrupted her reverie. She pushed the bench back, got up, walked across the shag carpet, and peered through the peephole. Mr. McCormick huddled in the hall, his arms wrapped around his pajama-clad chest. She undid the chain and pulled the door open.

His dark hair was tousled, and his face looked naked without his glasses. "The music is nice," he said. "But can you practice during normal hours?"

"I'm sorry," she said, feigning ignorance. "What time is it?"

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"It's after midnight and I have to be up at six." The whine in his voice made her look at him again. He wasn't much older than she was.

"I didn't realize it was so late," she lied. "I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

"It's okay," he said and started back down the stairs.

She shut the door and leaned on it, feeling perversely satisfied with herself. Finally, someone had noticed her.

Campbellsport was dull. Colorless. Lifeless. Its tiny main street had a Ben Franklin store, a few bars, a bank, and a post office. No beautiful, bare white walls. Ricky could remember when there had been a gas station on the corner, but now the big white building bore the name of a newspaper, although oil stains still covered the concrete driveway.

He had spent all night thinking. Painting this town would be difficult. There were no alleys, no warehouse walls. The white railings over the reservoir might be interesting, but the work would be minor. He would have to take his time here. The art was growing more difficult. He envied his brother's simplicity. How easy it would be to reach into a paint can and smear a canvas. He would miss (the dull thudding, the screaming, the woman pleading as her blood sprayed around them) the excitement, the feeling that he wasn't doing the work alone.

He walked across the street as tingles started their way down his spine.

The puppy growled. He ran for the boy before Mr. Bassinger could grab the dog's collar. The boy looked up, his expression almost feral, and frowned as if he were seeing the house and the tree-lined street for the first time.

"Pup!" Mr. Bassinger hurried after the dog, wishing that he had found a name for it. The puppy lunged at the boy and missed, then stood proudly on the boy's shadow.

Mr. Bassinger bent over carefully and picked up his dog. "I'm sorry," he said. "I haven't got him trained yet."

"Yeah," the boy said and grinned. The grin made Mr. Bassinger feel cold. The boy had a smile that seemed empty; the muscles around his lips moved, but his eyes remained untouched.

Mr. Bassinger backed away. The puppy wriggled in his arms, but he wouldn't let go. The boy's vacant grin followed them, and Mr. Bassinger stopped, remembering the murder. He didn't want the boy to know that he lived alone. He would wait until the boy left before going into the house.

"Do you paint?" the boy asked.

Mr. Bassinger frowned. The question made no sense. And then he realized that the boy was probably looking for work. "I used to," Mr. Bassinger said. "But now my son-in-law paints the house every two years or so."

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"That's all? Seems it should happen more. It has such white walls."

The boy was definitely odd. "That's all it needs," Mr. Bassinger said.

The boy grunted and started down the road. Mr. Bassinger felt some of his tension leave. He might mention the boy's presence to the sheriff. With all the murders going on around the county, no one could be too safe. And Mr. Bassinger had never trusted strangers much, anyway.

He walked to the enclosed porch and watched the boy turn the corner near the Meades' house. The old man squinted for a moment and then, for the first time in fifty years, locked the front door before nightfall.

He caught her near the reservoir where the two-year-old had disappeared six years before. She had just left her friend at a small house up the block. They had been giggling and stumbling against each other in the dark, and, for a moment, he thought they were drunk. Then he realized that they were teenagers, just a few years younger than he was, and teenage girls always acted drunk.

You're such a jerk, Ricky. Ricky. Ricky. That's a baby name. But you're sure not some Richard or Rick. Imagine calling him Rick? (Giggles.) *Imagine kissing him?* (More giggles.) *Yuck. Ricky. Ever been kissed, Ricky?*

Tingles rose up his back, making him hard and his mind almost crazy with pressure. She cut across the grass, and he grabbed her with one hand, the other touching his knife for luck. He had to drag her near the road. In his imagination, he could see the blood on the railing, dripping, creating its own random pattern.

She didn't scream, but her breath came raggedly as she tried to pull away from him. He took the other hand out of his pocket, and the knife gleamed in the streetlight. Her eyes got big and she gasped. "Jesus," she whispered. "You're not going to use that."

He brought the tip forward, thinking how lovely the blade was when he used it and how he wished he could keep the blood, but he knew the knife had to remain clean. The knife would slide into her skin, not thud like it had done earlier, and he would feel like an artist —

She screamed. The cry was piercing, startling, and he let her go. She started to run, splay-footed, across the grass. *Like a girl,* he thought contemptuously, and the thought made him feel powerful. He ran after her and, in a few quick steps, caught her.

She whirled, screaming, and all he could think was to stop the sound, silence her, get rid of the noise. He brought the knife up, into her throat, and the screams stopped as blood gushed over both of them, spraying the rail, the concrete, the water, and the trees.

Random splotches, he thought as he fought her so that he could stab her again. God, it was beautiful.

Jaaene understood what caused the iron scent this time. It almost over-

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whelmed her as he stabbed the girl. Jaaene watched the liquid squirt, the girl turn and turn, her mouth open and straining.

The chemical mixture in the air was almost too heady. Jaaene felt excitement build within her. She knew that she had picked the right human. From the moment she had touched him and changed his scent, she knew. And now he was doing it on his own.

Something in the mixture of scents made her feel stronger, more powerful. She would have to hold the charge. The girl was not right; she was too big. Jaaene would have to help him find something smaller, and then she would absorb it, like she should have done with Teelio.

Teelio. So little and perfect. She should have taken him inside of herself, absorbed him, until she grew even bigger. The race survived by absorbing. One didn't become a leader or a counselor or a judgmentor without absorbing. Absorbing was wisdom. But she had seen too many souls lost to the absorbing; little souls, like Teelio, never spoke out of the being they blended into. And she didn't want to lose Teelio. She was afraid that absorbing meant death.

But she was the bigger soul. Absorbing was required. When the enforcers saw that she had failed to absorb, they had caught her, and the judgmentors had ordered her punishment.

The girl stopped turning. The boy glided her slowly onto the concrete, stepped back, and then positioned her. Jaaene could feel the power dwindling, yet pulsing beneath them. The power was there if she wanted it. All she had to do was tap into it.

Sara set the newspaper face down on the dining-room table. The picture on the front turned her stomach. The poor little Reger girl. Sara had known the girl by sight; she used to neck with the Nielson boy in the yard of the apartment complex, by the trees where they thought no one could see them.

She didn't deserve to die like that.

"Did you bring the paper in?" Mr. Bassinger stood at the kitchen doorway. His expression was stern.

Sara handed him the newsprint, folded so that the picture was hidden. He opened it, stared for a moment, and sighed.

"I was hoping it wasn't true," he said. Then he handed the paper back to her as if he didn't want to see it either. "You'll be moving upstairs, then?"

That was something she had planned to bring up with him, but the question made her hesitate. "I'm sure they'll catch this guy soon."

Mr. Bassinger shrugged. "They haven't yet."

"But he's following a pattern. You can map his progress out on the road —"

"This isn't Chicago," he said. "All we got is a sheriff and two deputies for the entire county. And I doubt they know what they're doing when it comes to murder."

Sara nodded and ran her fingers across the cool newsprint. She wished he

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would offer her some coffee and they could talk as if nothing had happened. "Where's your puppy?"

"Outside." Mr. Bassinger turned and shuffled into the kitchen. "Coffee?"

"Please," Sara said.

Ricky smiled. The dog was lying in the grass. He had dreamed about that dog all night. The dog and the white, white house blazing in the sunlight. The final, perfect touch before he left for Kewaskum.

He stuck his right hand in his pocket and fingered the knife. Then he started up the lawn, walked around the old man's large garden, under the pine trees and toward the house. The dog saw him and growled as it wagged its tail. Dogs (Ricky stretched out his arm, and the dog sniffed it while his mother talked to the man by the door. *I'm kind of afraid,* she said, and the dog growled deeply, but Ricky kept reaching for it, wanting to touch its nose. *Especially when he gets bigger. I think he might hurt someone. Has he, Mrs. Davis? No but* — The fur on the dog's back rose and it bared its teeth. *Then we can't help you.* The dog snapped and Ricky barely managed to move his fingers away in time. *Ricky!* his mother cried. *Be nice to the dog!*) always growled at him, always tried to sink their ugly yellow teeth into his flesh. Yet he found them fascinating.

The little dog stood up and yipped. "Shhh," Ricky said. The white, white house and the little dog. If dogs bled red, then together, the house and dog would make pink.

At the second yip, Mr. Bassinger stood up. The puppy barked at everything, but never, to Mr. Bassinger's memory, had he made such a strange yipping noise.

"What is it?" Sara asked.

"Nothing," Mr. Bassinger said as he peered through the kitchen window. Between the streaks of dirt left over from the winter, he saw that boy crouching in front of the pup. A fear ran through the old man, deep and tinged with anger. This was too soon after Josephine. He grabbed his thick, wooden cane and pulled open the back door.

"Hey!" he said as he stepped onto the porch. "What are you doing to my dog?"

Jaaene could feel the power rising, smell the confrontation thick in the warm spring air. Scents were changing: the boy became sweeter, the old man tangy with fear. And there was something else, a rare fragrance she had smelled before —

— when she had reached across the darkness, electricity burning at the edges of her being, urging her to touch Teelio and grow stronger, wiser. Touch Teelio and absorb him —

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She slipped herself along the boy's back and reached with him, shadow becoming substance for a second of vision.

Sara slid her chair back and hurried around the table. Mr. Bassinger was wielding his cane like a weapon. She peered over his shoulder and caught a glimpse of the boy.

"Call the sheriff," Mr. Bassinger whispered.

"But —"

"Do it."

She ran across the kitchen to the dining room and the phone. The boy was doing nothing, but Mr. Bassinger was scared. Very scared. And he wasn't like so many of her patients. He was clear-headed, brilliant in his own way, and able to see through other people. With fumbling fingers, she dialed 911 and silently cursed as the phone kept ringing. Finally, someone answered.

"I'm calling from Campbellsport," she said. "110 Martin Street. There's someone in the back yard threatening the old man who lives here."

"Your name?" the dispatcher asked.

"It's not important." Sara wanted to get off the phone. Mr. Bassinger wasn't very strong, and if the boy really was threatening him. . . . "Do you have the information?"

"110 Martin, Campbellsport. Is this an emergency?"

"Do you think I would have used the damn number if it wasn't?" Sara snapped and hung up. She ran back into the kitchen. The screen door was shut, and through the mesh she could see Mr. Bassinger standing precariously on the back steps. She looked around for a weapon, any kind of weapon, and finally grabbed the warm coffeepot.

It would take the sheriff time to get there. And she needed a way to protect Mr. Bassinger if something happened. The coffee wasn't hot enough to scald, but it might give her precious seconds.

Tingles jumped into his back, making his nerves spin and dance. Ricky suddenly didn't care that the old man stood on the porch. Let him watch. Art could be participation. Ricky had watched his own brother back in the days before Tom (*Mom, you gotta do something about Ricky: he's getting really strange*) left and wouldn't come home anymore.

Ricky grabbed the dog's collar and pulled it forward. The dog yipped again, and the old man swung his cane over the railing.

"You leave my dog alone!"

The cane whooshed through the air, missed, and hit against the iron, nearly knocking the old man over. The dog was kicking at the dirt with its hind legs and trying to back away. It bit at Ricky, the wet slimy teeth grazing Ricky's forearm, drawing blood.

Ricky smiled at the dog, glad that it understood. He pulled out his knife —

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* * *

— and Mr. Bassinger swung the cane again. He wished his body would work the way it used to. He missed, nearly lost his balance, and had to grip the railing even tighter. Tears were running down his cheecks. *It's not fair, not fair*, he thought, *so soon after Josephine. It's just not fair.*

He had to try one more time, bringing that cane down and clubbing the bastard before he hurt the pup. Mr. Bassinger leaned against the rail and swung the cane toward the knife —

Jaaene could feel the life panting before her. This time she would absorb it, unlike the last time, the time they were punishing her for. She would take that pup and make it part of her being. The goal was unity, strength, and wisdom, not weakness. And the boy was helping her. She clung to his back and slid part of herself down his arm, ready to leap into the space between the boy and the dog, claiming back her real vision, filled with scents and lines, banishing the pain caused by the third dimension. *Enough*, she told the judgmentors, even though she knew they couldn't hear her. *I repent. I repent. . . .*

— as Sara ran down the stairs. She could see Mr. Bassinger swing, and knew with a certainty that he would miss again. The boy brought the knife up toward the pup's throat and, in a second, would puncture an artery. Sara took an extra step across the grass and flung the coffee at the boy's back. He —

— screamed. It burnt, burnt, burnt into his back and exploded along his arm. He let go of the knife, let go of the dog, and screamed again. It hurt. Didn't they know it hurt? He turned and saw a woman standing there, holding a coffeepot that still steamed. She had done it on purpose, like Suzy (*what a baby: touching a burner doesn't hurt*) and she would tell everyone it was his fault, just like Suzy did. But he didn't even know this woman. He —

— reached for her and Mr. Bassinger brought his cane down on the boy's arm. The wood made a satisfying crack that sent a jolt through Mr. Bassinger's body.

"Damn you," he whispered as the boy collapsed a few feet away from the puppy. The pup whimpered near the house, and Mr. Bassinger started toward it. Sara ran to the boy's side, touched his head, and then ripped open his shirt. Sirens echoed in the distance.

She looked up. "I need my kit and some ice."

Mr. Bassinger was amazed that she could move so quickly from combat to sympathy, but he nodded and climbed back up the stairs to the house. He grabbed her bag and then opened the icebox and removed the package of ice

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his daughter had brought during her last visit. His heart was pounding rapidly and he felt good, better than he had in a long time. He knew it was the chemicals — fight or flight, they called it — running through him, but for a moment, his body remembered how to be young. He hurried out the back door, handed Sara her equipment, and went to his puppy.

The dog whimpered again and huddled in his arms against his chest. He couldn't find any wet patches on the pup's fur, or any evidence that the boy had actually used the knife. The sirens were closer, and the sheriff's car pulled into Agnes Myer's driveway.

Sheriff Nathan Johansen — no, Andrew; Nathan was his brother — started across the lawn. Mr. Bassinger looked up. His body was beginning to ache, and now he would have to justify what happened to a man whose diapers he used to change.

"*Gott und Himmel*, Fred," the sheriff said. "What happened to your house?"

Mr. Bassinger looked up at the house his son-in-law had painted only six months before. There was a black swatch across it that looked almost like a human shadow, crouching and holding a knife.

The boy stirred and moaned.

"We've got to get him up to the hospital in Fond du Lac," Sara said. "Those burns are pretty bad." Her puzzled gaze met Mr. Bassinger's. "They almost look electrical."

He squinted, smelled the fresh grass beneath him. His back throbbed and his head rang. He opened his eyes and the sunlight hurt.

"How do we move him?"

"As carefully as we can. He's sort of conscious. Don't touch his back or his arm." A woman's voice. That woman who burned him? No, she hated him. It had to be another woman. "Can you walk?"

"Sure," he lied. There were hands on him, bending him forward, supporting him through the squeezing pain. The old man sat on the grass, hugging that dog (did dogs bleed red? he never got to find out) and frowning at him.

"That's not dirt on his face," a man said beside him. "He was too close to an explosion. I've not seen anything like that since Nam. What happened here?"

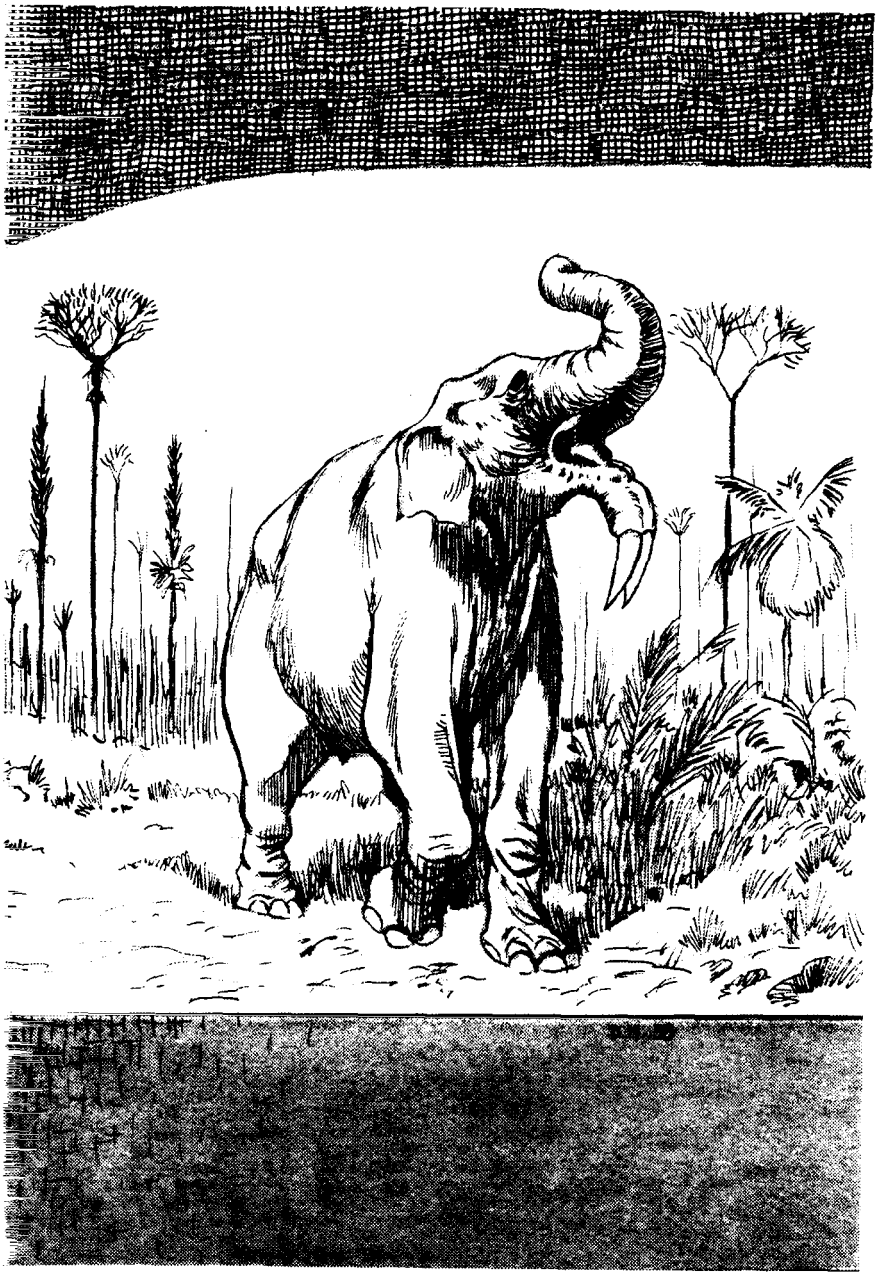
"Later," the woman said. "Let's just get him to the car, okay?"

They helped him forward, and then he saw it, his masterwork, stamped against the house in shades of gray. A shape — it hadn't been there before — undulated against the wall, trapped, like the shadow of a cloud on a breezeless summer day. He watched it, knowing it like he would know a lover, as it reached for a kind of freedom. He could feel its failure, its hopelessness, and then they led him past it. The memory of the shadow faded as he slowly came to himself.

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The author lives in Utrecht, a city in the middle of the Netherlands, which has almost as many canals as Amsterdam. Besides being an SF writer, he is also an SF illustrator. In his own country, he has published eight novels and more than 150 short stories. About a year ago, the author decided to start writing SF stories in English, his second language. To date he has sold several short stories written in English to SF International, Terra SF, DRAGON® Magazine, *and* Hardboiled; *and now, one to* Amazing Stories.

1

Waking in the ash-grey hours of the morning, he heard his dead wife sing. Dimitri kept his eyes tightly closed and felt his muscles grow rigid with dismay.

Footsteps. A shadow fell across his eyelids, turning the pulsing red behind them a darker shade. She seemed to hesitate.

No, don't kiss me! he thought.

The shadow vanished and her voice drifted to the tiny kitchen. She still sang, her voice clear and glad.

"Starman, o starman,
whatever you do,
don't shift my red eyes blue!"

A surge of the house current must have nudged the Sensurround recorder in the display mode, resurrecting a ghost almost seven years old.

He still remembered spraying the recorder on the wall. Thin filaments, invisible to the naked eye. It had a ten-billion-byte memory, and it would keep recording their conapt forever.

"When we're old," Jocelyn had said, "real ancient, you know, old and gnarled, we can go visit our younger selves."

The recorder was flexible, and that was the most horrible thing. It could interact, make those old recordings talk with their latter-day versions.

He rolled from the sleep pallet and found the jutting control panel by touch.

"Dimitri? You're awake?"

He shuddered. She sounded so *alive*!

He touched the switch in the upper-left corner, and her voice faded. Dimitri opened his eyes. He was alone.

A successful exorcism. But his wife would be back. Short of tearing down the walls, he knew no way to stop the recorder permanently.

We wanted it to last, he thought. Only the very best was good enough for us. And we could afford it.

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He walked to the kitchen and drew a glass of bitter coffee. The house was very silent.

Like a tomb. And all the ghosts want to talk to me.

His computer chimed, the screen flashing an urgent blue. Government override. He drank the last dregs of his coffee and strode to his computer.

Just what he needed. A nice disaster. What would it be this time? A thousand-story skyscraper crashing down on Tokyo's fission complex? A resurgence of the Red Tide?

He placed his thumb on the identification key, and the screen cleared.

TO: CITIZEN D. RIVERA, CONAPT 2567, THPL 835 098 23 GB YGK-9 NA

FROM: WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION, SECTOR NA, GREATER BRIGHTON

DEAR CITIZEN,
YOU HAVE OVERDRAWN YOUR MEDICAL ACCOUNT BY 67 UNITS.
ACCORDING TO THE MIRKSEE AMENDMENT, WE'RE NO LONGER ALLOWED TO PROVIDE CARE AND HOSPITALIZATION FOR YOU AND YOUR DEPENDENT(S).

PLEASE CONTACT DR. OOKA OF THE CLINIC FOR TERMINAL PSYCHOSIS.
YOUR SON WILL HAVE TO LEAVE THE CLINIC BEFORE 2 P.M. TODAY.
MEDICAL INFO WILL BE PROVIDED.
FAILURE TO HEED THIS WARNING CARRIES A CLASS-2 PENALTY.

He stared at the screen, unable to grasp the message in its entirety. Carries a class-two penalty. Instant and private euthanasia as opposed to a class-one penalty, slow and lingering death, broadcast on the government educational channel.

Your son will have to leave the clinic.

Your son will have to leave the clinic.

It was almost like a class two. After three years in a sterile environment the first newly mutated virus would kill his son.

The recombination laws had been stringent, but not stringent enough. Having defeated cancer and smallpox, mankind now faced a whole new order of microscopic enemies.

Mad scientists are rare; mad generals, much more common. And it was so *easy* two centuries ago, when there were still competing nations. One didn't even need a real laboratory once the human chromosomes were mapped. Just off-the-shelf, state-of-the-art techniques.

The biowar killed one fifth of the population. The newly formed world government didn't care. Its only regret was that the war hadn't killed more.

Fifteen billion citizens. One not so habitable world.

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The first action the government took was making all medical care free. *All* medical care. Every citizen had the right to a fixed amount of counseling, hospitalization, and medicines. Constant medical care was the only way to survive. Like the now-extinct influenza, the wartime viruses had been designed to mutate rapidly, to overwhelm any program of immunization the enemy might devise. The viruses had been an unparalleled success. Even now with the names of the original combatants all but forgotten, the bioweapons kept their original virulence. Without his weekly shots, the average citizen wouldn't survive for more than a month.

Medical practice without government sanction was a class-two felony, a sure-fire way to get very rich and very dead quickly.

A productive citizen could count on about fifty years of vigorous life. His son had never been a productive citizen, and there was small hope of him ever becoming one. In the eyes of the law he didn't even exist and should have been left to die.

Still, the government wasn't completely unfeeling. It was possible to help your loved ones. There was only one catch: each medical unit lavished on those who had exhausted their own allotment would cost twenty.

2

The sun was a red smudge behind his laser-proof window when he called the clinic. Dr. Ooka wasn't in yet, but his computer had several suggestions. A mobile cocoon with a self-repairing recycler, the kind used in long-range undersea craft. Certainly, the clinic sells them. With virus filters of course (change once a week). Several, say twelve, hundred-liter containers of All-Nuri, which was the best choice for intravenous feeding, though the government usually classified All-Nurit as a delicacy and charged accordingly. A cybernetic masseur, on sale in the more specialized sport shops.

"With judicious care your patient should last another month," the computer concluded in its most soothing bedside voice. "Perhaps even two weeks more."

Dimitri rode the lift down to street level. So early in the morning the lift wasn't crowded yet. He was able to put both of his feet on the floor. In the hall he checked his gun. All three LEDs glowed, and he pushed the vernier on ALERT. Black letters appeared on the tiny screen: "Stun. Killing optional." The small weapon wriggled in his hand and unfolded spidery legs. Using small suckers, it scurried to the top of his head and hid in his hair, its minuscule eyes scanning the faces of hurrying pedestrians.

Dimitri didn't like his weapon. It was too baroque with its enamelled carapace, its barbed legs and swaying sensors. He felt slightly ridiculous, like a two-penny warlock attended by an untrustworthy familiar. Still, it had

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saved his life. Several times.

And I got one tenth of their units, he remembered. The law loves citizens who know how to defend themselves.

He arrived at the clinic two hours early, the monorail not even breaking down once. Commuters thronged the streets, their wan faces looking dead. Reluctant zombies, powered by imperfect spells.

He crossed the street, his weapon buzzing warningly. Perhaps his uniform helped too, the members of Disaster Control enjoying a certain reputation.

The steps of the wide stairs were corroded, the artificial quartz pitted to a brittle foam. Nothing man-made survived the acid rains for very long.

He paused in front of the entrance. Wait inside? The waiting room was already crowded, and the faces of the visitors seemed to echo his own desperation.

A young woman sat at the edge of a bench, biting her nails. Her teeth moved in a steady grinding motion, like a cow munching grass. The fingertips looked like raw hamburger.

Dimitri shivered, unable to avert his eyes. It went on and on until he wanted to scream.

He abruptly turned and strode away. Misery doesn't love company. To know that your sorrow is the sorrow of millions doesn't help at all. It just cheapens it.

Clinic for Terminal Psychosis. Nice double talk. There existed only one terminal psychosis, only one mental disorder that neither drugs nor mental probe could cure.

Green-ache.

Never speak the word for it means that we have no future, that mankind has no future. Three of every five children born in the last decade suffered from green-ache.

Let me tell you our tale, traveller. The Piper stole our children. They heard his music, his green flute, and they all danced away, following him under the lost blue sky, over the green fields. Aching for the green.

They followed the birdsong Piper, his deer-fleet feet, esteemed traveller. And none came back. None came back.

We know we can't blame the Piper, can't blame him, for it could have been anyone playing that song. Our children, they just didn't like the world we made. The high-towered rat hives, the concrete, the burning rain, the sky so grey.

The psychomedics spoke of racial memories, of quiescent ancestral DNA activated by the unceasing stress of modern life. Children just took one good look at the world, their development quite normal for about a year, and then retreated. They fled in deep dreams, an autistic withdrawal into a fantasy world of endless grass plains, azure skies, rivers that still ran clear. The world for which *Homo sapiens* had been programmed when he still was in-

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nocent and animal. Green-ache. Terminal psychosis. Incurable.

The rational thing would have been to let the children die. They were only a drain on resources that had never been plentiful in the first case. But there were just too many of those small dreamers. They were the only future mankind had left. To kill that hope, to confess that they were truly incurable, it would have destroyed the whole social fabric. Also, to kill a sleeping child, that seemed somehow the most heinous of crimes. So the government prevaricated, issued bulletins that a cure was imminent, would be found in the next five years. And gladly allowed parents to waste their medical units on their lost children. In the eyes of the government the only good citizen was a dead citizen, and it was quite willing to help him to hasten his own demise.

An offshoot of the pedestrian river carried him to the pleasure district that had grown in the shelter of an abandoned airport. It was a meandering course he followed several times each week, always ending up in front of the Yemndi portal. He never went straightaway, playing a game with himself.

Shall I enter this cold neon-lit cave where a bearded sage dispenses the wisdom of the ages? Shall I follow the scent of warm perfumed flesh and spend the night in the arms of a courtesan, geisha-subtle and possessed of skills older than Eve's? Or, shall I go there, where middle-aged men gamble their last medical units in desperation against government-sponsored computers, the stake a brand-new heart, a vial of antibiotics?

He paused at a food stall to buy a cup of lukewarm beans. They tasted like old cardboard that had been reprocessed a thousand times, and left a sour aftertaste. He next inspected a tray of singing jewels, each lit by a tiny internal snowflake of pure light.

"Visit the rain forests of old Africa," a persuasive voice whispered. "Authentic reconstructions." The beam of sound was focused on his inner ear and seemed to speak directly into his brain. He turned his head, and the voice was abruptly cut off.

Authentic reconstructions! He knew the sloppy work of the usual historical diorama. Yet, why not? Why not? He had time to spare, and anything that took his thoughts off his son was welcome.

He scanned the colorful facades of the amusement halls. There, a pair of straggly date palms. Behind a web of violent green lianas the outlines of low huts shimmered.

He stepped inside, the entrance price of six yen was automatically deducted from his bank account. A sombre olive-green twilight enveloped him. The smells at least were just the right mixture: the heavy perfume of mold-spotted orchids, acrid humus, stagnant water.

Nor had the management skimped on the soundtrack. Small monkeys shrilled in the treetops, a parrot screeched his almost supersonic sorrow. And behind it all the dull roar of mosquitoes.

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The visuals, though, were lousy, barely adequate to deceive a citizen who had never seen a living plant. The green was the green of day-glow paint, luminescent, yet cold. All in the same hue. A true forest was a symphony of tints, none exactly the same. When he peered at the leaves, he noticed the absence of veins. They were just smooth ovals, not even serrated. Like a mathematician's dream of a forest, he thought.

He snorted and strode back to the entrance, suddenly unreasonably angry.

"Six yen is too cheap!" he snapped at the surprised owner. "Ask three times the price, and build something that works!"

"Nobody would notice the difference, sir."

"I would!"

"I would," he repeated, while he pushed through the milling crowd. "I saw the real forests."

3

The Yemndi time portal was located on a side street, one of the less frequented parts of the pleasure district.

He purchased a Yemndi wafer at the booth of the moneychanger, who seldom had to change any money, credit cards having superseded all coins and bills two centuries ago. Still, the man did a brisk trade selling the honeycombed wafers of lead with the merest traces of platinum, chrome, and niobium.

The Yemndi had become a fixture about fifty years ago, when they had suddenly arrived from the incredibly far future to set up their time portals. The government had tried to classify the time portals, cordoning them off, warning the citizens away. They soon discovered that it was pretty hard to keep a secret that was duplicated on more than three million locations.

The Yemndi brought a technology so advanced that the scientists hadn't been able to duplicate a single item. After half a century the laboratories were still trying. For instance, the Yemndi fuel cells were a simple disc of layered materials that slowly turned to iron, discharging a steady stream of electrons. Or light. Or gravity waves.

Some things, though, were easy to duplicate. The Yemndi wafer Dimitri had just bought was, in fact, a very good imitation. Which only worked inside a Yemndi dome.

The government-paid guard in front of the air lock didn't even look up from his war game. Miniature soldiers advanced across a simulated First World War battlefield, dying with shrill electronic yelps in the centimeter-wide trenches.

Dimitri obediently halted in front of the sensor-studded laser-guns, which covered the entrance of the dome.

The government, having reeducated all its former enemies, had never quite lost its suspicion of the time portals. Every day, upward of five thousand players took the big plunge through the one-way portals. Most would

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be caught by the time drift of a shifting portal, their molecules scattered over millennia. But some at least emerged in the spider-infested forests of the Carboniferous, the sandstorms of the Triassic period. Only the most adept players ever got as close to the present as the Jurassic. Still the dreams of the officials were haunted by the idea that they might be creating their own barbarian hordes in the far past. Someday the polarity of the gates might reverse, disgorging their savage descendants in the present.

"No gun, huh?" the guard said. "Not inside. Just leave it on my table. You get it back if you get back." It was clearly an old joke, and in poor taste too. Stepping through a portal was considered an interesting way to commit suicide. At least there had been no Ishmaels, for none who had stepped through the portals had returned to tell the tale.

The interior was a mosaic of black shadows and glittering surfaces, lit by the dazzling point source beyond the portal. Behind the portal the Yemndi home-time stretched: an Earth so incredibly aged that all her isotopes had turned into stable elements. The oceans were long since gone, leaving the dust, the airless deserts. A white dwarf, never rising or setting, illuminated the desolate landscape.

It had taken the biologists a long time to identify mankind's successors. The Yemndi's ancestors had been most humble insects, the common sand flea that had grown gigantic and, for a time, quite intelligent.

The Yemndi had mined all of Earth's minerals, constructing a shining ring of space cities. Masterful genetic engineers, they programmed all their knowledge into the genes of their offspring. A newborn Yemndi larva was heir to a staggering technology, a living data bank of profound depth and diversity. And quite, quite unable to learn a single new fact.

All useful power sources gone, their sun in its dotage, the guardian computer network of the Yemndi had sent them back into the past. High-tech civilization dotted Earth's long time stream, only some of it human.

The Yemndi craved minerals, energetic isotopes. The computers had made the right decision: all high-tech civilizations were playful, unformed. They liked to gamble, they liked challenges. The Yemndi time portals were the ultimate challenge, a way to wrestle with Chronos itself, and the non-Yemndi were quite willing to pay with their precious minerals for their pleasures.

A Yemndi squatted on a low pedestal just in front of the six-cornered portal. Flexible cables emerged from her ruddy carapace, connecting her with the hardware of the portal. The Yemndi was clearly a part of the apparatus, no longer a self-directed organism.

Dimitri shoved past her torpid bulk, and the small eyes, dull as lead, turned in the sockets to follow his progress. She lost her curiosity in a matter of seconds. Her powers of concentration had become as dim as her intelligence.

Dimitri inserted his wafer, and the time portal swirled, the white dwarf fading, fading, till only star-strewn space was left.

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A dark cloud rose from the left quadrant, obscuring the stars. It rotated, faster and faster, and abruptly ignited. A new sun shone, her fire lighting the accretion disc that soon would condense into planets.

Once again the view shifted, and he gazed at an ocean of glowing magma, the uncratered moon filling a seventh of the sky. Blue flames danced along the yellow horizon.

This was the base setting of the game, Earth still molten and violent. Dimitri's task was evolution, to force the oceans to condense, to raise mountain chains, to paint the barren deserts green.

Electrodes snaked from the portal and touched his brow. Dimitri merged with the time portal, became Time itself, a master of change.

Strangely enough, the game itself was only a by-product of the imperfect adjustment of the time portal. It had been attuned to the Yemndi nervous system. The sluggish alien on her pedestal could have effortlessly opened the portal on any of Earth's ages. More than that, she could have held the portal steady long enough to allow short excursions and a safe return. For a human operator it was quite a different case. It took a major effort of will to move the portal from the base setting at all. It was even harder to keep the portal fixed for the half-second needed to cross the interface. A slight hesitation as one stepped through a drifting portal, and the body's atoms scattered over millennia.

Leaper or gamer — there were only two options for those who used the time portals. The leapers were desperate, willing to cross to any time but the present. The gamers, well, they had their own brand of fanaticism. For them this was the ultimate video game, their reason for life. But they would never step through the portal. They weren't that desperate, yet. Also, stranded in a foreign time, they would be unable to play the game, and that would have been cause for desperation indeed.

Dimitri's breath escaped in a hiss, and he embraced the Earth, radiated her heat away into outer space, forced the heavy radioactive isotopes to sink. A crust formed. Steam filled the portal for a moment and then the rain started. When the view stabilized, he looked across a blue ocean, waters too pure to sustain life.

It took him several seconds to weave the long organic chains, to construct the first one-celled organisms. Parts of the shallows turned green, and almost all anaerobic life started to die.

He urged the green to cling to tidal rocks, to migrate to the empty plain, the saw-toothed mountains. Sweat beaded his brow, his hands balled into fists. One moment of inattention, and the Earth would devolve, time streaming back to the lava oceans.

He shifted continents, drew rivers and deltas, clad the lumbering saurians in armor. When his watch beeped to remind him of his appointment, he had reached the Jurassic, watching a herd of dolphin-like saurians play in the waves.

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He disconnected the electrodes, and the portal reverted to zero, switching a moment later to the Yemndi home-time. Dimitri glanced at the huge scoreboard, the only human-derived piece of technology in the dome. Grandmaster Herbert von Brechten still held the highest score ever with his penetration in the Lower Cretaceous last month. The grandmaster was a quadruple amputee, his whole life revolving around his daily struggle with the portal. Dimitri found his own name on the fifth-place spot: his own position as champion of the Eurasian sector was still secure.

4

He sealed the throwaway isolation suit and followed Dr. Ooka through several air locks to the inner sanctum of the clinic. Harsh ultraviolet irradiated his suit, turning the photosensitive plastic black for several seconds. Acids sprayed him, followed by a fuming caustic. The transparent doors of the ward finally slid aside.

"We'll provide a mobile stretcher, of course," Dr. Ooka said. "It's not really a medical issue, you see. Though it doesn't come cheap." He was a nervous young man, his pale grey eyes belying his Oriental ancestry.

"This here, it's completely sterile?" Dimitri asked.

"The ward? I certainly hope so!"

Dimitri's shoulders slumped. "You take good care of them. Nothing but the best. Two years in a sterile tank, and all the time the microbes outside have been busy mutating. Did he have his shots against Ruhr-deco? The Chinese Spasm?"

The medic shrugged. "So he ran out of luck. If we had kept up his immunity, we would have been forced to throw him out a year ago. Intensive care eats up medical units like crazy." He gestured to the softly glowing walls of bacteriophagic plastic. "Two days here costs the same as your weekly broad spectrum shot." His voice became harsh. "Sometimes we have to make a choice. We don't like making choices, you know."

"Sorry," Dimitri muttered. It was both unfair and useless to take out his anger on the hapless Ooka. The intern was clearly an idealistic young man, trying to work miracles while hoarding the medical units of his patients. One mistake, and Dr. Ooka would be forced to leave the patient in the middle of an operation, prohibited by force of law to close the gaping incision. And Dimitri knew there had been no choice, not a true one. His son was completely helpless, and he needed the complicated machines of intensive care. Often the sufferers of green-ache became so engrossed in their dreams that they even forgot to breathe.

Dimitri and Dr. Ooka walked through the incandescently lighted ward. Murals lined the walls: rolling meadows, forests. The ceiling was a hologram of blue sky, a color that hadn't graced Earth's heavens for generations.

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"An experiment," Ooka said. "Trying to recreate the fantasy world of the patients. Lure them back to the ward. Didn't work. They never open their eyes. Even if we peel back the eyelids, they just don't focus."

"They're comatose?"

"No." Dr. Ooka stopped in front of a survival capsule. A toddler drifted in a yellow syrup, her muscles massaged by padded manipulators. "You see the screen? All jigs and jags. Brain waves. We call those thetas. Means they're thinking, thinking very hard."

He turned away but not before Dimitri had seen the pain in his eyes, the powerless sorrow. "They dream. They never wake."

5

The streets were still crowded, the second morning rush only just beginning. He installed his automatic gun on the head of the stretcher, and that seemed to help a little. At least people took care not to jostle the stretcher. A plastic cylinder enclosed his sleeping son, keeping the deadly air outside. The small filter-pump purred, sterilizing the air, but it wouldn't keep out the subviruses. Some of the new mutations were no more than twelve clustered atoms, yet capable of great harm.

He could try to buy shots on the black market, but it wouldn't save his son. Two years lost: there was no way Sergio could regain his immunity. The side effects alone would kill him. Also, this stretcher was a very poor imitation of the sterile ward. The integrity of his son's environment would soon be broken.

Dimitri kept on walking. It was no use trying to board the monorail with the awkward stretcher.

It would be a long walk home.

"Need a lift?" A small car halted next to the stretcher, and the electrified thorns of the stretcher extended to clear a way through the pedestrians. Renfew, his supervisor, opened the door. The man had the face of a worried bulldog, all folds and creases. Holographic curlicues, fire-engine red, swirled over his shaven pate. "Heard about your son, Dimitri. Too bad." He flapped his hands, the very picture of concerned awkwardness. "We can fix the stretcher to the roof I think. I have some instant glue. Got to get him inside." He glanced at the sky, the lowering clouds. "Looks like rain. I know this kind of plastic, completely nonallergenic, sure, but the acid'll eat it like *this*!" He chopped downward.

"Thanks," Dimitri said. "I appreciate this."

Two minutes later Renfew started the car. "Heard about the new policy? They finally classified the time portals as a 'negative disaster.' Their way of saying that the portals are doing us a lot of good."

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"They do? It isn't exactly what they have been saying for the last fifty years."

Renfew nodded. "I know, but Councilman Pavimurta took one look at the latest statistics and turned completely around. Do you know that the portal suicide count has climbed to twenty-three thousand a day? It looks like everybody who can afford the wafers is crossing over!"

"I see." It was just another meaningless statistic. "So what do they want us to do?"

Renfew shrugged. "Make the portals more popular, I guess. Perhaps some airtime on the entertainment channels? The council also voted to provide five wafers a month to people on Social Security."

Dimitri felt his ears grow hot with embarrassment. They were his portals! A way to pit himself against the cosmos, an almost sacral act. The leapers had always been a minor annoyance, easy to forget, but now the council proposed to turn the portals into ordinary suicide booths.

"Won't work," he grunted. "You need a lot of willpower to reach the epochs beyond the Great Rain. Nobody is going to step into a goddamn magma ocean!"

"You'd be surprised," Renfew said. "According to the records, some even walked directly into the Yemndi home-time. Explosive decompression. If they didn't freeze first."

They drove the rest of the way in silence, oily yellow drops spattering the windshield.

6

The filter-pump sounded very loud in the apartment. Dimitri had retracted some furniture into the walls, but the huge bulk of the stretcher still made it almost impossible to cross the living room. For two hours Dimitri squatted on the edge of his pallet, his eyes fixed on the face of his son. Sergio was nine years old, but he barely looked five, as if the years in the hospital didn't count and he had only slept a single night and would presently awake.

No doubt it had been some kind of drug, Dimitri thought, to keep him from growing up. Growing children were guzzlers of medical units. He didn't know if he should hate Dr. Ooka for meddling with the very life of his son or praise his foresight.

He peered closer. The boy wasn't unconscious. Several times he saw the eyes move behind the eyelids, the rapid shifting associated with REM sleep.

Dreaming. His son was dreaming. He wondered in what green meadows his son was walking. Would there be flowers?

Dimitri had never seen a flower. They were a quite recent invention of nature, and the Jurassic, his present record, didn't have them yet. Only stately forests, their floors twilit and silent like cathedrals.

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There was a stir at the edge of his vision. He slowly turned his head. His vision wavered, and he felt the moistness of tears on his cheek.

"Please," he murmured. "Please. Not now."

His wife sat in the corner of the room, her face impossibly youthful and aglow with health. She didn't see him: her eyes were fixed on the baby on her lap.

Had Sergio ever been so small? He looked like an exquisite doll, the hands so tiny Dimitri could have encircled them with a single crooked finger.

Behind his wife the air grew opaque, solidifying in the outline of a young man. For a moment the new Dimitri kept looking at his sleeping son, but then the interactive circuits of the recorder cut in and he raised his face.

Dimitri sat frozen. He can't see me, he told himself. Not really. It's only a cybernetic tropism, a clever faking of human reactions.

"Why don't you give him the green?" the youthful Dimitri said. "There is so much of it. All he needs is the green."

Dimitri numbly shook his head. The words of his double sounded so plausible. Half an hour in the unspoilt past would draw his son back to consciousness. Yet the suggestion was nonsense, pure noise. Certainly, behind the portals stretched all the meadows of time, but what use was it to maroon the two of them in some Jurassic wilderness? No human could survive completely on his own, and the time of men had never been reached. One of the most rigidly enforced rules of the council was *no teams*. Never was more than one human at a time allowed in the Yemndi domes, while pregnant women were altogether barred. The government didn't want to risk a breeding pair escaping in the past.

"Maybe sheer effort isn't enough," his double continued. "Maybe you need hate. Hate fueled by love."

Dimitri rose. "You sound like an oracle. I don't need the advise of a goddamn recorder!" He waved his arms. "Go! Go!"

Perhaps some of his emotion registered because the ghosts obligingly started to fade. The last he heard was the thin, frightened wail of his baby son.

7

It took him three hours to contact his sister. Marianne was high enough in the Prestigious Astronautical Corps to rate a secret number. In the end he had to use the override of Disaster Control.

"Renfew phoned me about poor Sergio," Marianne immediately said.

Dimitri nodded, surprised by a sudden surge of warmth for his supervisor. Renfew was thoughtful that way. No doubt he was trying right now to drum up support for his friend. Dimitri's sister had been an obvious choice.

"I'm so sorry! I tried and tried, but there's nothing I can do!"

Dimitri knew that her own husband was overdue for a liver transplant. It

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would wipe out most of Marianne's medical account. "I was thinking of suspended animation. The comet drugs."

His sister shook her head. "That's only a fancy word for hibernation. The heart slows down all right, and the breathing becomes very shallow. It retards aging, but that won't stop viruses from multiplying. The opposite in fact, because the immune system slows down too."

"I didn't know."

"Is there anything I can do? You need money?"

"No. It wouldn't be of any use. Even if I could get the shots Sergio missed, the side effects would kill him."

8

He had met the grandmaster twice before. Dimitri could only stand him for a short time. The loss of his limbs had left von Brechten quite a bitter man, his face etched with lines of self-pity and petulance. Von Brechten just wasn't one of your saintly sufferers. Still, both men had at least felt a grudging respect, the brittle kinship of fellow fanatics.

The satellite relay to Seoul was even worse than usual, providing Dimitri with a wavering two-dimensional picture, the borders fringed with color. Von Brechten peered in the screen while his retinal implants scanned the face of his caller. He was a veteran of the ill-fated second Persephone expedition, kept alive long past his productive life by a generous state pension.

He raised one of his jury-rigged manipulators in a clumsy salute. "Dear enemy, how good to see you. Still clinging to your precarious fifth positon?"

"As if you didn't know!" Dimitri forced a smile. He had forgotten how utterly wretched von Brechten looked, the merest sketch of a man.

And he's only three years older than I, Dimitri thought.

Von Brechten leaned closer to the screen, his torso raised by whirring servos. "I have been number one for a long time now, my dear Dimitri." He paused, his Adam's apple bobbing. "And it's killing me!" His manipulators trembled under the surge of sudden passion. "For years I have been waiting for you bastards to challenge me. To climb beyond your stupid Jurassic!" The spidery fingers clenched into fists. "I need an enemy!" he wailed. "Someone to keep me alive!"

The line was too beautiful to pass up. "And you have no enemy but time."

"Exactly! Exactly! You understand." He pursed his lips. "Sometimes when the pain is especially bad, I have a dream. I'm standing in front of the portal, looking out over a grassy plain, snow-topped mountains in the distance." He closed his eyes, and his face grew almost serene. "Yes, white mountains in the light of the setting sun. Mammoths are grazing, and in the distance I see a tiny thread of smoke rise in the still air. A fire made neither by lightning nor by any other force of nature. And then . . ." He took a deep

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breath, let it escape in a hiss. "Then I'll know I'll have reached the Age of Man." He opened his eyes, and Dimitri saw the peace evaporating, leaving only painful yearning. "But I need you; I need you, my enemies. To reach that moment I have to feel the wolf pack breathing down my neck."

"You're too good. We'll never make it. We simply don't have your genius."

The grandmaster nodded. "True perhaps. So I'll tell you the secret of my success, young Brutus. It's fury! It's hate, pure and simple. Don't woo Time, I say! Rape her!" He kept nodding, his eyes growing glazed. "Hate her, rape her," he mumbled.

"I'm not a good hater," Dimitri said. He didn't know if that was true any longer, but he wanted to goad von Brechten, to keep him talking. If anyone knew a way into the green, it was the grandmaster.

"You don't have to be a good hater," von Brechten said in a flat voice. "It comes in five-milliliter vials, and the name is Thyrosone 12." He licked his lips. "Thyrosone 12. Extremely addictive and quite illegal."

9

It took him five days and half the money he had borrowed from Marianne to locate the black medic. The man lived alone in a five-person apartment and served a hundred-year-old brandy in goblets of cut glass. Ostentatious display of wealth: Dimitri gave him another month at most. The excessive power drain of the apartment alone would serve to alert the monitors.

"It's a wartime drug," the dealer explained. "Iranian originally. It was used during the Second Jihad, but discontinued shortly afterward. The side effects were something fierce." He opened a small box. Five vials rested on simulated velvet. "Distilled rage coupled with insane self-confidence. Made for good soldiers. Except that they tended to forget who exactly the enemy was. Zeroed a lot of their own officers." He took a vial between thumb and index finger. "I won't ask what you need this for. Take one, and you'll come out all right. Two and you're hooked. Three, and the only thing they can do is put you in a big cage and throw the key away."

Dimitri pushed his nine ounces of refined germanium across the table. "I'll take all five."

10

The crowds swiftly parted before him while he pushed the stretcher through the pleasure district. Citizens of the high-density belts had very sensitive antennae. Not that they needed them in his case: his rigid body fairly radiated anger, the red joy of a berserker. He had prudently left his gun at home. The simple-minded weapon was far too attuned to his moods; no doubt it would have

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mowed down any commuter who even slightly obstructed him. Dimitri's palms and fingertips tingled, so preternaturally sensitive that each dump of the stretcher sent waves of delicious agony through his whole body. To maim, to kill, to hear the lovely snap of a spine!

All his feelings were heightened, and his love and protectiveness for his son were almost unbearably intense. Tear the stars from the sky for you, he thought, batter a tunnel through Time.

"You leave your weapon outside," the guard murmured. The man still didn't recognize Dimitri, though he visited this time portal at least four times a week. No doubt the job bored the guard.

Dimitri wheeled the stretcher to the entrance of the dome. The guard languidly raised his weapon. "Hey, you a moron or something? You can't take him in there. Everybody knows the first rule. No teams." He still sounded bored.

Dimitri shrugged. "So scan him. He isn't functionally human. He doesn't exist."

The guard peered inside the cylinder. "Green-ache, huh?" For the first time a flicker of emotion crossed his face. It was revulsion. "All right, take him inside. He's no woman and you aren't pregnant."

The Yemndi stirred on her pedestal, waving a front leg. Come inside, ancestor. Spend your precious minerals on this, the ultimate video game.

The time portal still showed the stagnant far future. Grey sands, the whole world a low-budget zazen garden, not even enlivened by artfully arranged pebbles.

Dimitri squinted against the dazzling point source of the aging sun and inserted his wafer.

Flecks danced in front of his eyes. One became the emaciated face of his wife, ravaged by Ruhr-deco.

"At least he has you to take care of him," she said. "At least he has you."

Words she had never spoken, Ruhr-deco being mercifully swift, the first symptom of an irreversible coma.

The portal spasmed and the dwarfish sun was gone.

Ancient Earth's glowing magma oceans radiated their fury.

He felt an answering hate.

Change! Evolve! Build me mountains!

There was a sky of torn sulphur-yellow clouds. Silhouettes wheeled in the storm. They were still wrong, clad in cold flesh, unfeathered.

Go! Move! Evolve!

His nervous system pulsed, his ganglions burning like captive suns, searing his flesh.

Evolve!

And suddenly the dark green forests were festooned with intricate flowers. The Upper Cretaceous! He had passed the sombre needle-clad hills

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of the kingdom of dinosaurs. He never saw his own name replacing the grandmaster's on the scoreboard.

An incandescent streak of fire crossed the blue sky, and suddenly the whole world was winter. Blizzards raged.

He felt a wild elation. The planetoid had fallen, killing the imperial lizards.

No one has reached this far! I'm the first to see their Fimbulwinter, their Gotterdammerung, Dimitri thought.

He tasted blood, the welcome pain of a bitten tongue.

He rode the shock wave of his fury, his longing.

The luxuriant jungles were gone. Grass inundated the plain like a green flood. Eocene? Miocene?

He felt his control slipping, the monstrous tug of the deep past. One minute more, he prayed. Give me just another winter. Give me the red-haired mammoth, the fleet gazelle.

A flash of white, so short he could have imagined it. Let it be the Ice Age, please God, let it be the Ice Age!

He tugged at the stretcher, keeping the portal steady by pure desperation. It crossed the interface, sliding half a meter above the waving grass.

He jumped and fell face forward in the stiff grass. He struggled upright, his muscles weak as water.

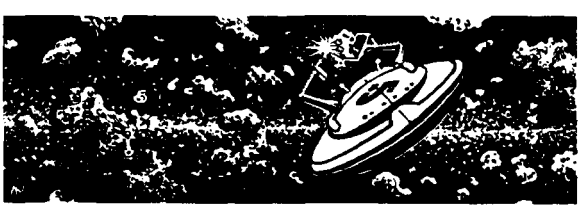
We made it. We made it. To the green world, the blue sky. I'm in your dream, Sergio!

He scanned the horizon. There was no thin thread of smoke, but he knew there would be one of these days. This was the Age of Man.

He unsealed the cocoon and laid his son in he fragrant sedge. Flies buzzed.

The unlined face seemed very relaxed. A tiny smile curved Sergio's lips.

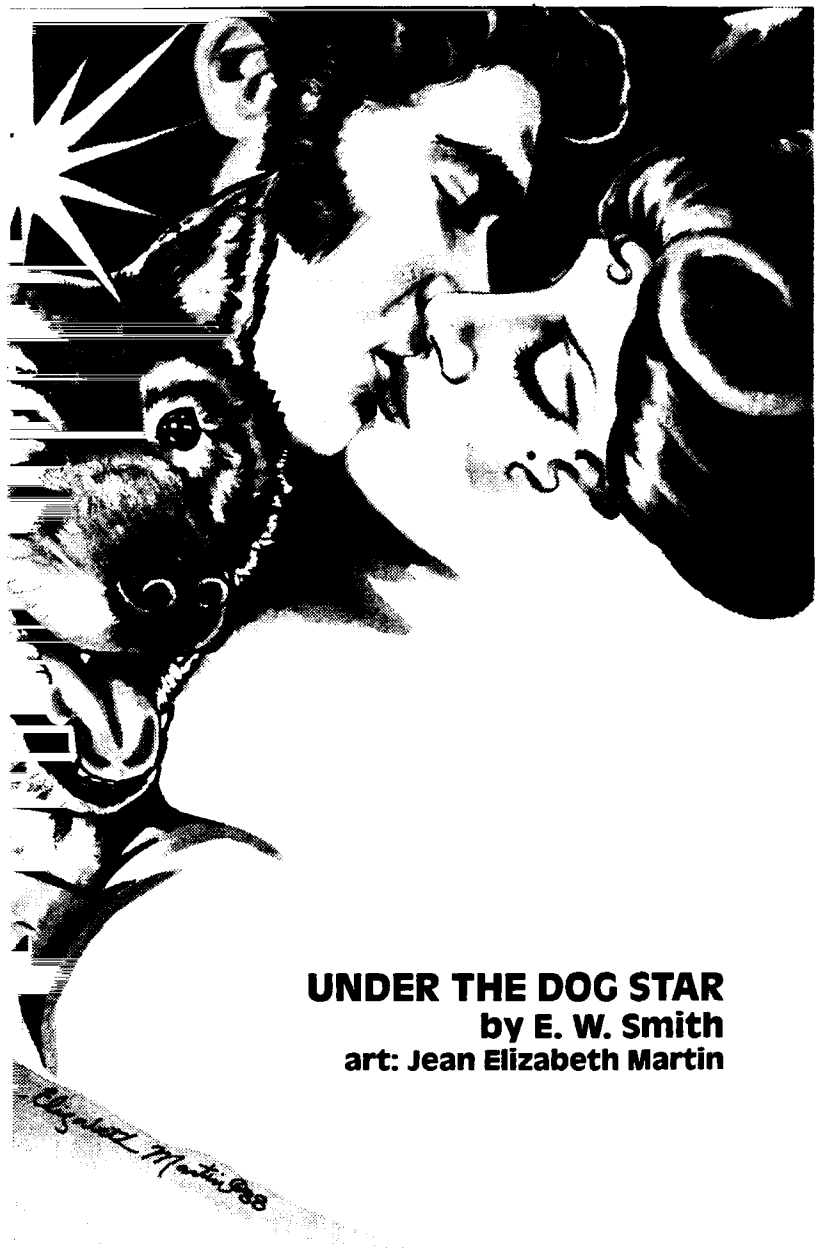
"Soon you'll wake," Dimitri whispered. "Soon you'll wake." ✪



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UNDER THE DOG STAR

by E. W. Smith

art: Jean Elizabeth Martin

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E. W. Smith, a lecturer at Pennsylvania State University, Schuylkill, is currently working on a novel set in the 1920s and has a 1988 Fellowship in Literature from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. Her stories and poems have appeared in periodicals such as The Davidson Miscellany, Earthwise, *and* Twilight Zone Magazine. *This is her first sale to* Amazing® Stories.

When I was a young woman, in my twenties, I bore a child. Only considerably later did I become a mother. This is a not-infrequent occurrence. I was far too busy struggling with the difficulties of my own life when my son was born to meet the requirements of being a parent, and so I gave over my son's rearing and protection to his father, who expired suddenly during the twelfth year of this arrangement. A staunch proponent of free love, I had never married Grey's father, and although there was a scandal, Oscar Wilde was then so much a topic in the salons that my own affair received but middling interest.

Despite society's opprobrium, I never regretted my decision. We should have been rancorous opponents within the confines of matrimony, but also, Grey's father already was a married man with no inclination to put his life in complete disarray. Had my good sense somehow failed, his would not; we remained free of each other, and the scandal faded away. When he died, our son was returned to me like a parcel, arriving on my doorstep one day, label affixed to his coat button. By that time I had become a celebrated journalist, earning a comfortable income and dining out on my celebrity as many evenings in the week as I chose. I was able to send Grey to a good school while I traveled and wrote my articles and books. We had an uneasy relationship, for we were not often enough in each other's company to establish any depth of understanding, or to round off the sharp corners of our natures.

When Grey reached maturity, in years if not in manner, I had the idea of launching him into society and perhaps finding him a career by having him act as my secretary. Albeit reluctantly, he agreed to try this situation, for the summer at least, assisting me while I worked on a series of articles for the *Daily News*.

It was during the summer, during the steady dog days of August, that we encountered Serena and Proctor de Canis, a meeting that profoundly and tragically altered all our lives.

Grey and I, traveling north by train for a fortnight's visit with an old friend, were making our way through the rattling corridor as the train decreased speed into the station. Trains tend to rattle most while slowing down, I have noticed; at top speed, they almost glide along the rails. We had ventured into the corridor because I wanted a word with the porter, who was then conversing with a most remarkable young man. The porter was quite the usual model, in dark uniform and cap, but his interlocutor was of some

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new design for young men that I had not seen before. He wore a light summer suit with a pinkish cast to it and contrast banding at the lapels and pockets. The cut was narrow, fitting his figure perfectly. The tailoring seemed foreign, for the English prefer to swathe the figure in baggy pleats and folds. He was below average height, extremely slim in the hips, but his upper torso was fully developed, giving him the look of a wrestler from the waist upward and a ballet dancer from the hips down. His voice was a bit gruff, as if the tones scratched against the back of the throat, and I thought I detected a slight accent, which might have been Baltic or Balkan for all I could tell. His dealings with the porter completed, he passed me and, in doing so, tipped his chapeau, smiling in a perfectly friendly and amiable way. His eyes were large and expressive, a deep soft brown, his eyebrows very light and looking slightly surprised by everything. His profusion of curly hair was a curious varicolored mixture of black and amber and was somewhat frosted with white, a sign of premature age surprising in a young fellow scarcely twenty. The expression on his face, however, is what I recall most strongly, for he seemed the most innocent and good-natured soul I had ever encountered in human form. I thought to myself, How painfully young he must be. Any pain was, of course, not within that good young man, but within my own older and wiser frame as it recalled youth's openness to all the perils of experience.

I had my word with the porter, who was quite agreeable, leaving me with a cheerful, "I shall see to it immediately, Mrs. Essenden." As he left, the remarkable young man was once again in the passageway, this time with a bag in one hand, an umbrella in the other, and on his face a look of great delight. He had heard the porter address me.

"You are the famous Mrs. Essenden, the journalist," this remarkable young man asserted with engaging enthusiasm. "I have read your work with the greatest admiration." Indeed, his expression reiterated his words. "You present the world so utterly clearly, you know. Most authors seem to think that if they write a thing simply, they risk being mistaken for simpletons. Therefore, to appear complex and inscrutable, they muddy the waters of even the most transparent idea. But you, Mrs. Essenden, I bow to your perceptions and your clarity." And bow he did, snapping his heels together in the German fashion. Had he not been hampered by portmanteau and bumbershoot, he no doubt would have kissed my hand. I have found that young men are often such puppies.

Grey scorned these effusions, not merely because I was their cause, although that may have added several centimeters to the curl of his lips, but because he disliked any show of enthusiasm in others. Grey was a willful person who gave the appearance of control, a melancholy temperament not disposing him toward exhibiting any happy feelings. Crossed in anything, however, anger would out, and his ill humor would prompt others to let him

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have his way. It was a lesson learned well from his father.

This young puppy was just the sort to annoy Grey, who certainly looked with annoyance on the entire scenario and was about to move away down the corridor when, from the puppy's compartment, emerged a young woman. Grey was not stopped in his tracks by her beauty, for she had none to speak of, but her emergence and our situation in the narrow passageway prohibited Grey's departure. This young woman was surely the puppy's sister, for they were almost exact duplicates in countenance, physique, and gesture, but she was more reserved than her brother, probably from shyness. She and Grey performed a stately dance in some embarrassment, each trying to allow the other to pass and succeeding only in blocking the way. The young puppy took charge. Plumping down his baggage, and thereby managing to forestall anyone's movement anywhere, he took her hands with great fondness and explained to her who I was.

They formed a charming picture, both of them eager and innocent, and I was almost convinced they were creatures of delicate beauty, so fine were the emotions that stirred their features. Unaccountably, I was reminded of my first glimpse of the Matterhorn, which had remained so obscured by clouds during the first day of my Swiss sojourn that I was unaware of its presence. On the second morning of my stay, after a night of tossing and turning because of some difficulties with the piece I was writing, I turned toward the window, eyes open, and beheld through parted clouds the numinous Matterhorn arrayed in the glory of the sunrise. What had been a boring and tiresome excursion suddenly changed completely, and I felt as though beauty had stepped up to me and touched my heart. And here in a stolid British train rattling into a staid British village was a young woman, Serena, who seemed especially to elicit this same marked response in me. Her face, her nature, seemed utterly sweet and charming, and her love for her brother, Proctor, was enchanting. They were the soul of innocent affection.

We were soon sorted out, and out of the train, where we awaited Lord Grogan's appearance, for Serena and Proctor de Canis were to be his house guests as well. Grey had gone off to see about the baggage, wanting some respite from our prattle, and we had moved off the platform toward the carriages to avoid the general bustle when the dust and din of a motorcar signaled the arrival of our host. In case we had somehow failed to notice this boisterous entrance, Lord Grogan sounded his Klaxon horn several times, causing his more conservative neighbors to cringe or glare as he passed. The motorcar was still a relatively new phenomenon in these country towns. A final whirl of dust as he stopped, and Lord Grogan leapt from his vehicle with the agility of a man far younger than his actual years. He strode briskly over to where we stood, his dustcoat flapping. He removed his goggles as he came, and we could see where the road dust had grimed his features. Serena and Proctor giggled like schoolchildren at the negative image of goggles on

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his face; against the grime, the protected skin was startlingly white, and he was quite unaware of the comic effect of his dust-raising journey.

I had not seen Lord Grogan for several years. Some time past, we had been lovers. Now we counted ourselves fortunate in having a friendship that endured after ardor cooled. Occasionally, a happier bond is forged from the shackles of passion, friendship succeeding what we call love. Love is seldom happy when passion is involved. In our ignorance we mistake euphoria for happiness, there being as many mistaken identities in love as in a French boudoir farce.

Lord Grogan was five years older than he was when we last met — mathematically, of course, so was I. But his eyes revealed a certain weariness that years have little to do with. I had just formed this impression when Grey rejoined us, having given instructions about our bags, which were to be brought separately by horse and cart, and we walked to Lord Grogan's horseless wonder. He thoughtfully had provided dustcoats for us all. Grey thought this unnecessary, but the de Canises were delighted with the prospect of wearing these billowy white garments and widening their heretofore limited experience of motorcars. Their ebullient spirits enlivened our own expectations.

How it happened I do not rightly know, for I was with Proctor and Grey, examining the engine of the motorcar; though even Lord Grogan, who was on the scene, could not explain it either. He and Serena were around the side of the car, where he was assisting her with a dustcoat. It may have been the flash of the dustcoat as Lord Grogan shook it out, or it may have been that some evil genius traveled down with us from London. In any case, a horse and rider were in the act of passing by one moment, and in the next the rider was on the ground and the horse was rearing up and pawing the air dangerously close to Serena. The young woman was petrified with fear, incapable of motion to save her life.

Lord Grogan grabbed for the reins but was immediately knocked down, and still the horse reared as if ready to strike Serena. Suddenly Grey was there, snatching the terrified young woman away, and at the same moment the recovered rider got hold of his horse, leading it off to one side.

"Henry," I said, starting toward Lord Grogan, "you had better not be killed." But he was sitting upright on the ground, looking dazedly amused and holding his left forearm. I helped him rise. His sleeve was torn, but there was no blood, and we turned our attention to the others.

Proctor stood attentively by, quite pale from the fright, for Serena had narrowly escaped injury or worse. She, poor child, held onto Grey for dear life and could not be persuaded to let go. Looking somewhat embarrassed for himself but concerned for her, Grey took turns with Proctor in trying to soothe her. She trembled from the fear, her eyes very wide-open and white. We were assured of her physical safety; it remained only to calm her. Let go of Grey she would not, although she was gradually persuaded to confine her

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grip to one of his hands, and in this way he led her to the motorcar and sat with her.

"She has this fear of horses," Proctor explained to us, looking woebegone. "They quite throw her into a panic even at the best of times. They do me as well."

Lord Grogan and I approached the poor horseman, who was patiently awaiting conferral. He stroked his horse's muzzle with a gentle hand, and indeed, the horse was now the essence of moderation, standing there quite demurely.

"Absolutely unaccountable," we all agreed, and the rider, somewhat stiff from his tumble, mounted and rode away. Lord Grogan and I returned to the car, whose passengers seemed eager enough to be off, but there was one further difficulty. Lord Grogan's arm was giving him some pain, and although nothing was broken, we decided it was advisable for him not to exert it in driving.

"But who —" he began.

"I shall," I said. "Get in and we shall be off." He did, and we were. "Women are quite able to drive motorcars," I told him crisply.

"As I very well see, Margaret," he said.

And as we drove, Serena seemed to leave her fear behind her. Soon, she and her brother were laughing gaily, their eager faces tilted up and sniffing the air. They drank in the experience. Everything was new and joyous to them. Lord Grogan was always turning around to look at them and smile. Even Grey warmed a bit, and once I heard him laugh.

Having arrived at Lord Grogan's estate, we were allowed, as Proctor put it, "to lie doggo," and we rested in our rooms until the dinner hour. When next we saw our host, his left arm was suspended in a sling, the handiwork of one of the other guests, who was a medical man. Dr. Markham was a tall, dark, beetle-browed man considered by many to be our foremost surgeon. His hands were suitably slender and agile, his manner suitably austere, although not entirely stuffy. He apparently enjoyed the company of the gentle sex and seemed as content to flirt with a woman my age as with Serena. Such behavior on the part of a married man, I have found, tends to indicate that his wife values him so little he needs to validate a better opinion of himself in every other woman he meets.

Mrs. Markham, a sandy-colored woman of thirty or so and extremely conscious of her social position, wore a gown of emerald satin that made the rest of us look like Quakers. Double rows of diamonds glittered at her ears, her hair, her throat, her bosom, and anywhere else possible to suspend or append a piece of jewelry. She had a reputation for soirées where gathered the top milk, if not the cream, of London's beau monde. As her tastes were satiated more pleasurably by painters than writers, by men rather than women, she had not much use for me. I had once refused an eleventh-hour invitation from her to round out an odd number at her supper table, and she made plain she had not yet forgiven this effrontery. In our bright new century, age

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receives no quarter from the young.

Our talk that evening was as much directed toward the sciences as the arts. Proctor de Canis proved to be a well-read young man with an eclectic knowledge and a wit that kept us entertained throughout dinner. He and Serena relished their food, digging in with gusto after an initial hesitation. Teetotalers, they drank no spiritous liquors, consuming great quantities of water instead. Their slight hesitancy about the food gave rise to an amusing incident when the fish was set before us, for while the other guests made free with their forks, the de Canises seemed reluctant to begin. Then I noted that Proctor, who sat beside me, deftly manipulated a bit of the fish into his napkin, excused himself from the table, and exited the room. I would have paid no mind to this but, happening to gaze into a mirror on the wall opposite, I could observe the young man as he stood in the hall, for he had gone no farther than that. For a few seconds he stared into the napkin in his hand, sniffed at it with some skepticism, then delicately sampled the fish concealed therein. This he seemed to rate favorably, and he returned to the table forthwith. Serena, who seemed waiting for his return, studied his face closely. Giving her an encouraging smile, he nodded to his plate and began eating the rest of his fish, whereupon she followed suit with her own. I assumed that, as foreign visitors to our country, they had not yet become accustomed to British cookery.

This gustatory oddity went unnoticed by the others at table. Dr. Markham, having learned of my plans to tour the Balkans, was regaling us with stories of his own recent venturings there and his encounters with the peculiar denizens of the remote villages, "where knowledge seldom penetrates the wrappings of superstition," he said. Our talk was then of vampires and werewolves. Grey professed astonishment that anyone could find such tales credible.

"Is it so incredible, that men could turn into beasts?" Mrs. Markham asked. "I should think werewolves nothing but an adorned reference to basic human nature. The beast will out in all of us."

"But that is hardly supernaturnal. I no more believe in the supernatural inhabitation of man or animal than Mr. Sherlock Holmes believed in a supernatural hound of the Baskervilles."

Serena wanted to know about this hound and who was this Mr. Holmes, not being familiar with Conan Doyle's extremely popular entertainments that were currently all the rage. Grey enlightened her, with assistance from Mrs. Markham, an avid fan of the great though fictional detective. She had a few comments too about the "doting, doddering doctor, that Watson, you know," whose lumpishness she said was quite amusing. This talk of Sherlock Holmes interested me — as a journalist I could learn from the popular writers of the day, my own field depending somewhat on the tastes currently in favor — but Dr. Markham sought to draw me into his conversation with Lord Grogan. They had recessed back in time from superstition to myth

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and finally prehistory.

"I am a modern woman, Dr. Markham — or in the words of the popular press, a New Woman — and far more interested in what will happen to Bismarck's Germany, now that he is dead and we are into a new century, than in what took place a millennium ago in the mists of prehistory."

"Prehistory goes back farther than a mere millennium," Lord Grogan admonished, his eyes twinkling.

Dr. Markham had his comments as well. They tended toward the dry. He had missed his calling as a don. "An effective apprehension of Bismarck may be reached by a thorough comprehension of his rugged forebears," the doctor intoned. "History can only repeat itself, it seems, having run through all its original motifs. One groups conquers another, their cultures mix into a composite entity, and they go off together to defeat a neighbor, annexing all the neighbors until the expanded structure falls in on itself through lack of supports. Bismarck's Germany will follow the pattern of Alexander's Greece."

"Bismark may have formed a more stable entity," I said. "Unlike Alexander, he acted not for himself but for his king and his people, and in doing so, may have invested his activities with more intellect than passion. Bismarck was another Talleyrand, or Metternich. Such men are a regular occurrence, and lasting — not as meteoric as an Alexander or a Napoleon."

"Nothing is new under the sun," Proctor observed drily. "Even meteors, which seem utterly spectacular and unique, occur with precise regularity, following a natural cycle."

"Nothing is new under the sun, moon, or stars," commented Mrs. Markham with some boredom.

"But we are all new," Serena argued. "We have never lived before. I do not believe in reincarnation, but if there were such an experience, I am certain we would not come back precisely as we were before. There would be but shadows of the former self, a look perhaps, a gesture, a memory. No more than shadowy vestiges of the life before."

"Life progresses," Grey said with conviction. "The centuries move on, and reincarnated beings must not be stragglers, they must relinquish the past and fall into step. Life moves forward and will not stop for anyone."

"Oh, but life should pause now and then, don't you think?" Serena asked ingenuously. "Some of us straggle behind the rest to enjoy the scent of flowers in the sun's warmth."

Proctor smiled at his sister. "Yes, and to keep an eye on the honey bees so they pollinate correctly. Someone has to take an interest in these things. Leave it to the amateur scientists — now there are stragglers for you — to keep an eye on the homely details of life."

"There seem far too many amateur scientists," Grey said. "Why are they so wary of calling themselves scientists outright?"

Lord Grogan chose to answer. "If we call ourselves amateurs, we are per-

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mitted to make mistakes. Scientists, I am afraid, must answer to the rigorous demands of perfection."

Serena laughed. "But scientists are dedicated to experimentation and therefore condemned to make mistakes at a great rate."

"They must perform their experiments behind closed doors," Lord Grogan observed. "They commit their mistakes in private and only face the public with conclusions that are flawless."

Grey gave a humph. "And the more egregious errors are swept under the rug," he said.

"Men of science will always put on the robe of perfection," said Mrs. Markham. "One carefully cut to hide any imperfections of physique."

"Men of science should never marry," Dr. Markham said, presenting me with a knowing look, as if he and I were confederates. "Their wives are only too ready to announce their imperfections to the world."

Mrs. Markham opened her lips as if for some decisive announcement, but the doctor preempted her with a rush of words, having perfected this technique at least.

"Malthus," he said. "Over a century ago, Malthus urged man not to marry, to place a check on the geometrical progression of the population lest it overwhelm the arithmetical progression of our food supply."

His wife, glancing slyly at our host, remarked, "Lord Grogan, however, spurs on the superpopulation of the food supply by forbidding hunting on his lands. It is high time he remarry and have progeny enough to restore a balance. Or do amateurs of science bow to the same dictum about matrimony?"

"For all that," her husband said, "he might just open up his land to the hunter."

Serena ventured to say that she hoped Lord Grogan would not encourage hunters in their cruel sport, to which Mrs. Markham replied that he ought at least to encourage husband-hunters in theirs.

Our host, however, chose to avoid a direct response. "Malthus," mused Lord Grogan, "is an intriguing figure. To him, the theological view of life as a vale of tears was entirely wrong. Instead, he announced that life is a test tube. A view in which I might concur." Here, he raised his wine goblet and slowly rotated the delicate crystal, swirling its ruby contents as if it were a laboratory beaker wherein lay elemental truth. "Malthus asserted, nevertheless, that this test tube informed the mighty process of God, although on this I have not formed my own opinion. Distress and chaos he claimed as the formidable process of inspiriting matter, of taking dust of the earth and ennobling it with spirit and mind." We watched silently as he held his glass toward a candle flame, peered deeply into the luminous red liquid, and summarily drank this down. "This I would dispute. My distressed spirit and mind have more of the chaotic about them than the ennobled."

He looked so weary and uneasy as he said this, Serena placed a gentle

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hand on his, examining his features with great compassion.

"You must forgive me," he said to her. "In these few years since my wife passed away, I have found myself in a continuous tussle, with reason trying to assert itself over the chaos within." And he looked into her soft, concerned eyes as if some assistance were there. This did not please Grey at all, who tried for more impersonal table talk.

"Faced with this Malthusian scenario," he ventured, "of limited food resulting in famine, Mr. Darwin would tell us that far from ennobling our spirit, we would fight tooth and claw for the available food supply, and the weak — i.e., the good among us — would go down. So much for the meek inheriting the earth."

Gently did Serena regard him. "Perhaps the good Demeter would save us all," she offered, and turning once again to Lord Grogan she asked him if he believed in such myths.

"I must," he told her, smiling. "As a farmer, I must believe in any supernatural deity that watches over the harvest."

Our dinner soon after concluded, and when we ladies repaired temporarily to our own company, Mrs. Markham vented some spleen in my direction, professing interest in the intricacies of my marital status. Yes, I had eventually wed, though now was a widow.

"But with your sentiment of free love, why would you marry?"

"It was a marriage of convenience."

"You did not love your husband, in the romantic sense, then," she concluded with evident satisfaction.

"Oh, but I did," I told her. "Which made the marriage even more convenient."

I observed Serena's enjoyment of this exchange, for she had reddened when I appeared under attack, and I think she might have come to my rescue had I seemed on the verge of defeat. But I had learned long ago how to handle these country weekend skirmishes.

During the next several days, I relaxed in the good country air and was able to forget, for a time, the demands and frustrations of my work. Grey, I could see, was well on his way to falling under the spell of Serena. She was so remarkably sweet and endearing, without any of the odious wiles of the husband-hunter, I could easily understand anyone's loving her, especially Lord Grogan. Over the course of our visit, the weariness in his eyes, which I had earlier remarked, was quite in retreat. It might show itself from time to time, but let Serena come upon the scene and immediately it dispersed, to be replaced with a look that might have begun in affection but was fast becoming an expression of something more passionate. Lord Grogan, however, was a man who usually remained on his guard in such matters, and I knew he would do nothing to compromise her innocence. Of Grey, I had no such certainty.

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We sat together one afternoon, Lord Grogan and I, watching the young people play at tennis. Grey and Proctor were the adversaries and Serena their referee, though Proctor could hardly be said to adopt an adversarial role. He was the soul of goodness, and a very poor tennis player. Though he played doggedly, he was without skill, and in fact was so solicitous of the other player's feelings should he by chance score a point himself, he seemed to prefer not to win. He took delight in the game, caring not a whit how many sets he lost. Grey tended toward the opposite, being so concerned with points, he never quite enjoyed the game. Playing with the good-natured Proctor, however, and being cheered on by Serena — who cheered on both of them even-handedly — Grey I saw was smiling, and on hearing his laugh, I could form no other opinion than that he was having a good time. Proctor's enjoyment was obvious, and he ran about lobbing the ball and making great woofs and yelps in delight and exertion.

The de Canises took great pleasure in even the smallest things, always expressing sincere interest and enjoyment. If they heard a noise, they must know whence it came, and they were always sniffing the air, remarking on the various scents. They were always hearing and smelling things that the rest of us could not detect, approaching life through all their senses. They loved to meet people, Serena overcoming her initial shyness to smile and extend her small, gentle hand in warm greeting. Proctor was always more gay and outgoing, laughing at the slightest provocation, and provoking as many laughs in others as he could. They both had a quiet laugh and would look at each other with mouths open and their almost silent laughs seeming to overpower their slim frames. They had many conspiratorial jokes between them, finding amusement simultaneously in the least occurrence, and they had a penchant for composing doggerel. Grey and I had been spontaneously immortalized by them. Their lines on Grey seemed apt, though innocently so.

There once was a young man named Grey
Who though he could have things his way,
Till he met by surprise
The sparkling eyes
Of the woman who has him in sway.

Of myself, they recited the following:

There once was a writer who wrote
Articles politicians would quote
Till they found out that he
Was actually she
And demanding that women should vote.

My career had run something of the sort, although politicians still chose to quote me.

Thinking of this and the amount of work that awaited my return to London, I sighed and, upon looking away from the sportive trio, found Henry

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studying me.

"How is the new mother?" he asked with some amusement.

"Henry, I am too old for these things," I answered ruefully.

"Come, come," he said. "You are in the prime of life. I was there myself some years ago and recall the terrain."

"You will never be old, Henry. You simply will not allow it." We laughed together, old friends having a comfortable chat. He asked about Grey and myself, and I explained as much as I chose to.

After Grey was born, you see, and relinquished to his father, I had not the courage to sever completely the connection. I sent presents, wrote letters, paid infrequent visits, always with more discomfort for us both than I was prepared to admit to anyone. But as I saw Grey develop into a duplicate of his father and exhibit those traits that had driven me away from the man, it became easier to effect distance from the child. I was to regret it bitterly, for had I exerted any influence at all when Grey was a boy, he might have been quite a different man.

None of this had I expressed to Lord Grogan, but he was astute, as usual. "You have your self-doubts," he remarked, "as much as you have doubts about Grey. You must give yourself time, and him as well. After all, Grey is very young, and although you claim to see in him a duplicate of his father, I can attest to his being very much like his mother."

"I am not sure that I like your comparison," I said. "Grey is quite willful and stubborn."

Lord Grogan looked pointedly at me as if to say, "I told you so."

"He may be somewhat like his mother," I granted, "but how close to being a mother am I?"

"Mothering is instinctual," he told me.

"My instincts are tired."

"Atrophy," he said dismissively. "Use your instincts, and they should soon recover strength and vitality."

"My instincts seem to have been covered over. They are so profoundly smothered in their wraps they are unable to fight their way free," I said.

"Margaret, Margaret," he laughed at me, shaking his head to negate my conclusion. "It is true, we seem to have abandoned our instincts in favor of what we choose to term intelligent or civilized behavior, but you must believe we cannot forsake our true selves."

I could take no comfort in that thought. "What if our true selves are not entirely satisfactory? What if our true selves are dismal, cold, and unkind? Everywhere I look I see icy exteriors, not a speck of warmth. Lately, I imagine myself as Frankenstein, or his creation, adrift upon the ice floe, with only other ice floes for company."

"That is our crust, not our inner core. Civilization wraps us in beauteous but cumbersome clothes. We could move more freely and gracefully without

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our restrictions, but we will not give them up, nor allow anyone to divest us of them. The dog in the wild works with his pack; the dog in the manger — in a trap of human manufacture — keeps off all trespassers. But even the dog in the manger will respond to petting. Instinct asserts itself. However much we force ourselves away from it, force instinct down, it reasserts itself. And I have always found that our basic instincts are for the good."

"Henry, you are the most sentimental man I know, next to Proctor de Canis."

"Oh, I have the edge on him, Margaret," he laughed. "By thirty years and more."

"They are quite instinctual, both of them," I said, following my own train of thought. "Proctor and Serena rely on their instincts. They seem quite cannily able to get at what is going on within us all."

"They pierce to the heart, don't they?" he commented. He had felt it too.

"They leave themselves delightfully open to others, and are so completely alive. The rest of us, far too keen to keep the walls in place, are not only poor transmitters, but poor receivers as well."

"Atrophy again, my dear. We lose those powers we do not exercise, and all of modern existence seems predicated upon tamping down spontaneity."

Here, the players joined us, and Lord Grogan's dogs as well. The de Canises were especially fond of these beasts, great and small, for Lord Grogan kept an amorphous pack. Greyhound, spaniel, retriever — it was no matter to the dogs, who were as companionable as if no differences existed among them. In fact, they treated Serena and Proctor as if they were members of the pack. Proctor was always baying to them or barking, imitating their sounds and habits with the talent of a born mimic.

"What a marvelous pack we are!" Proctor said, as much to the dogs as to anyone.

Lord Grogan regarded them admiringly. "Dogs have been friends to humanity for over twelve thousand years, perhaps longer," he remarked. "Their social behavior is much the same as our own, for they live in groups, working together to achieve their goals."

"Why this special allegiance to humans, I wonder," said I.

"They admired our superior skills at the hunt," Grey replied, "so they joined right in for the kill."

"But dogs are not merely creatures of the hunt. They also helped protect the home, guarding against marauders, in human or other form," Proctor said. "And no doubt they made themselves generally agreeable when the hearth was peaceful and only sociability was required. Dogs and people seem to care for one another in quite a special bond."

Lord Grogan saluted Proctor's remarks, adding, "Still today, in some of the cultures less impinged upon by the strictures of civilization, one occasionally sees an old custom, a woman nursing an orphaned whelp." At this delicate

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ground, he veered off in a safer direction. "The Greeks believed that the dog was forged by Hephaestus, the god of fire. He was the only ugly Olympian, and lame, but he fashioned objects of great beauty. He forged assistants out of gold who helped him in his work. Perhaps he forged golden dogs as well."

"Oh, I should think silver more appropriate," Serena laughed, while a quite lively young greyhound licked her hand.

"Byron had a favorite dog, you know," Proctor said, scratching the ear of Lord Grogan's favorite spaniel, an elderly dog that was quite content to lie about and look extremely wise. "His name was Boatswain."

"When Boatswain died," Serena said, "Byron had a special tomb prepared for him."

"And on the tomb," Proctor continued, "he placed these words: Beauty without vanity, strength without insolence, courage without ferocity, and all the virtues of man without his vices."

The young man was now scratching the chest of the elderly spaniel, who lay on his side with an expression of pure delight on his grizzled face, one hind leg stuck stiffly up into the air. Proctor decided this was irresistibly comic and was soon down on the ground facing the dog, assuming the same position, still scratching its chest. The spaniel licked Proctor's chin in reciprocation.

"You are an original," I told Proctor. He sat up with an endearing grin on his young face, ready to be told more.

"I can vouch that you and your sister are truly singular."

But no, they shook their heads at this, giving vent to their peculiar, open-mouthed, silent laugh.

"We are twins, you know," Proctor said directly. "Twins can never be singular." They laughed again.

"That explains your singular closeness, at any rate," I said. "You need no words with one another but seem to know what the other is thinking."

"We are very close," Serena admitted. "But then, we have had only each other for the longest time."

"Our parents passed on when we were quite little. Young, I should say, for we are little still," Proctor said with an easy laugh.

"Surely there was someone to care for you? Some grandparent, aunt, or uncle?"

"Our people are very short-lived, it seems," said Proctor. "They die very young. Our mother had a twin brother, but he passed on shortly before she did, and our mother died of complications in childbirth."

"And your father?" Grey asked.

"Passed on when we were four, and he had no relations. We were passed around a bit, but we could always count on each other." Here, brother and sister looked at each other with that expression of love that I found so vital.

"The name of de Canis was our mother's" Serena said. "There apparently has been a tradition in the family that the name be handed down through the

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children that way. It is so very old and rare, and there are so few of us."

"Only us, actually," Proctor said. "And seldom any issue through the males in the family. It seems to be genetic — that and twins and a short life."

For once Proctor's high spirits seemed at an ebb, and he sat unusually pensive. Lord Grogan's elderly spaniel raised its head to study the young man and soon was standing before him, pressing his muzzle into Proctor's chest, licking his hands. At this, Proctor smiled, gently cupped his hands on either side of the dog's head, and gazed into its compassionate, noble eyes.

"Yes," he said to the dog. "It's quite all right, you know."

Our talk one evening being of astronomy, one of Lord Grogan's amateur interests, it was only natural that we spend the hour before our supper stargazing on the terrace, where a telescope was positioned for our amusement. We took turns squinting through this magical cylinder at the inverted images it encircled.

It was just sunset, and the air seemed the essence of roses, the day's exceeding warmth having brought out their perfume. A light breeze, no more than a zephyr, carried the scent to us from the rose garden.

"What is that lovely star?" Serena asked, indicating a brightly glowing orb.

" 'Fair as a star, when only one is shining in the sky'," quoted Mrs. Markham, pointedly. She disliked the admiration accorded Serena by the men in our party and seemed not to understand how a plain-faced woman with few marriage prospects could hold their attention. Seeing my cold stare and realizing I, at least, knew what she was about, she laughed and braved it out. "Wordsworth, I believe," she said.

"Tennyson, actually," Grey replied, unaware that he had come to his lady's defense, unaware that Mrs. Markham bristled at this correction. "But as to the name of that fair star, I could not hazard a guess. Poets I am familiar with. The stars and I have never been properly introduced."

"Lord Grogan?" Serena turned to him confidently. "I am certain you know."

Our host cleared his throat. "It is not a star but a planet," he instructed drily, but when he looked into Serena's odd, inquisitive face, I noticed a softening in his expression. "It is lovely," he admitted. "Lovely, for good reason. It is Venus." Somewhat awkwardly aware of his enchantment with Serena, he cleared his throat again and continued with the astronomy lesson. "We see it at sunset, then again at sunrise. Venus is a planet that never strays far from the sun."

"Venus, the goddess of love," Serena said, gazing at it approvingly.

"And love is the morning and the evening star, if you will allow me to quote verses as well. Very apt, don't you think?" Proctor said.

"Oh, there is another, bright and fair. Which is that?" Serena inquired,

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adding before anyone could answer. "But Venus is still more lovely, even now there are two to compare."

"Mercury," Lord Grogan announced. "It is also a planet that remains near the sun."

"When the sun sets on its journey below the horizon," Proctor said, "these companions must follow, and we should see them set off on their travels if we stand here long enough."

"Which would never do," Lord Grogan told him, "or we should miss our supper. Come, we must go in. My dear?" He gave his arm to Serena, an act giving her great pleasure. Proctor watched this, grinning like a schoolboy who had some secret to confide. Grey stood to one side, watching as well, and I did not care for the expression on his face. As I drew near him, thinking to enter with him, he rudely spun away and offered his arm to Mrs. Markham. Haughtily, coldly she accepted, and he led her into the dining room, his rage only slightly suppressed. The observant Proctor, seeing this affront to me, immediately offered his arm, indicating to Dr. Markham that he should do likewise.

"A team of escorts, Mrs. Essenden," Proctor said gaily. "One on his own could not do you justice." His good spirits somewhat rallied my flagging heart.

At table, our talk continued astral.

"Venus is so lovely it seems a shame she cannot stay with us long," Serena commented to Lord Grogan.

"The best and brightest seldom do, and Venus is the brightest planet in the night sky," he remarked.

"What of Sirius?" Mrs. Markham asked. "The Dog Star, isn't that what it is called? Surely Sirius is the brightest."

"Sirius is the brightest star, Venus the brightest planet," Proctor responded.

Lord Grogan looked at him approvingly. Here was someone who spoke the same language. "You have a knowledge of astronomy?" he asked the young man.

"In all modesty, I cannot claim a knowledge of it, or knowledge of many things at all, but I do claim an interest."

"A curiosity," Serena corrected, teasing him fondly.

"It appears to be another family trait. One of our grandparents, we don't really know which one, seemed to be an amateur astronomer."

"An astrologer, more likely," Serena told us. "We had several peculiar old manuscripts that belonged to someone in the family."

"Astrological charts of some sort," Proctor said. "Showing the constellations and conjunctions, you know."

"I never could make out the constellations," I said. "This one is supposed to be a lion, that one a maiden with a water pitcher. I don't see how one finds

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these shapes in a few points of light."

"Surely," Mrs. Markham scoffed, "any child can find the Big Dipper."

"Perhaps I am too experienced to have such innocent vision. But, no, you are right, my dear Mrs. Markham. I seem to recall actually seeing the Big Dipper, on one or two occasions."

"There is a Little Dipper too," Serena prompted.

"Yes, and Polaris marks the handle," Lord Grogan said. "It is just above the Big Dipper, but the design is inverted." Then, looking at Serena's interested expression, he recalled something. "Legend has it, among the Indians of America I believe, that the Little Dipper pours out the autumn colors onto the trees."

"What a lovely thought."

"They seem to come in pairs, you know," Proctor said. "Big Dipper, Little Dipper. Ursa Major, Ursa Minor — that is, the Greater and Lesser Bears."

"Canis Major and Minor, the two dogs," Mrs. Markham said.

"Yes," Proctor remarked. "And it is in the constellation Canis Major that one finds Sirius — the Dog Star. Sirius is quite the most beautiful star imaginable."

Serena was eager. "May we go stargazing again later, Lord Grogan? I should like to see the most beautiful star imaginable."

Grey emitted a laugh, seemingly contemptuous of this stargazing, but I thought rather more envious of Lord Grogan's position of grace in Serena's eyes. "With the nickname Dog Star, Sirius hardly seems a prospect of beauty. Furthermore, when the Dog Star rises, the days grow hot, uncomfortable, and utterly disagreeable. You must know that is why one speaks of the dog days of August."

"Because the heat is doggedly upon one, my dear chap?" Proctor lightly asked.

"Dog days from the Dog Star, you idiot," Grey roughly dismissed him, refusing to indulge pleasantry when gall and bitters proved more to his taste. "Legend would have it, Lord Grogan, that it is the time of year when dogs are beset by spirits and driven mad. The Romans promulgated that, I believe. You had best look to your hounds."

"Perhaps Mr. de Canis is likely to bear watching," Mrs. Markham spoke up. "After all, his name would seem to indicate some relation to the canine population."

"Very good," Proctor laughed. "I have often considered that similarity myself. Watch me, indeed, Mrs. Markham, for I should be flattered at such attention from so charming a quarter. But you know, one person's madman is another's philosopher, and I feel myself waxing philosophic of late, and not at all prone to distemper."

"Your good temper is obvious, but what has your philosophical mind been turning round?" I asked him.

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"How the stars seem to offer us a message of companionship."

"They are far enough removed to remove all thought of companionship," said Mrs. Markham.

"Not so, my dear," her husband remarked. "Among the spheres, all is intertwined. Why, Procyon accompanies Sirius, and each is accompanied by a nearer companion, a dwarf star, which one would need Lord Grogan's telescope to see. The constellation Canis Minor accompanies Canis Major, and both are the companions of Orion, who once hunted regularly with Diana. When he was killed by a jealous suitor, she placed him in the sky, where he could hunt perpetually."

"Diana was very considerate, wasn't she, allowing him his dogs for celestial companionship?" Serena commented.

"And considerately she arranged to keep them both out of mischief," Lord Grogan said. "As Keats kept the figures on his Grecian urn from succumbing to temptation, Diana keeps the hunters forever separate from their prey."

When his mind turns toward poetry, Henry is in a rare mood indeed. Grey's mood, however, was not improved. Intent on being a spoiler, he announced rather sourly, "I prefer to think, as others do, that Canis Major and Minor are two of the hounds of Actaeon, the hunter who was turned into a stag by Diana as punishment for viewing her at her bath. Whereupon his hounds turned on him and tore him to pieces."

Serena became agitated at this. "Oh, that cannot possibly be true."

"My dear Miss de Canis," he replied, "how could any of those fantastical tales possibly be true? It scarcely matters which legend we apply, they are all merely entertainments pulled from the mists of the past. They have no real substance, they are but vapor."

"But you must concede, my dear chap," Proctor asserted good-naturedly, "that such phenomena as foxfire and will o' the wisp — mere vapors you would say — impress us far more strongly than objects we can touch."

Dr. Markham spoke. "That is because we have endowed a bit of phosphor with the supernatural. It is the supernatural that causes our fear or wonder. Decaying organic matter becomes ignis fatuus, foxfire. Reduce these things to their scientific explanation, and fear and wonder vanish."

"I should always wonder at will o' the wisp, despite the most thoroughly logical explanation," Proctor said. "But I suppose I prefer the supernatural. It is always so imaginative, so intangible, so incapable of being interfered with."

"I prefer what I can grasp," Grey replied. "I choose the actual over the supernatural."

"You are a pragmatist then, Mr. Essenden," Serena said softly, her words bearing a slight coloration of regret. "You are not a romantic."

"Science dispels romance, Miss de Canis. Romance can exist only in the absence of knowledge. Scientific fact chases all the mists away, even the phosphorescent ones."

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Serena sighed. "Yet I prefer the mists, Mr. Essenden, particularly the phosphorescent ones. Lord Grogan does too, I suspect." She turned to Lord Grogan as she said this last. He had been attending to this exchange with tolerant interest, and fixing his eyes on Serena's face he replied.

"Truth dresses itself either in robes of romance or of science. Both are the visible costumes of truth. Gazing on undressed truth can be as dangerous to us as gazing on Diana was to Actaeon. We stumble upon truth without it being even the object of our hunt, and seeing its beauty we think that it is harmless. We soon learn otherwise. We may be keen for the journey to truth, but having arrived, we like it not, for our welcoming committee seems composed of Gorgons and our accommodations are decidedly Procrustean. Truth provides no extended dialogue, no appeal, no explanations, and we must have our explanations. I seek the scientific ones, but I must admit to a partiality for the romantic. Which comes, no doubt, from reading the Greeks."

Serena studied him with a lovely expression of gratitude and understanding. Grey laughed at it as twaddle.

"We know who the romantic is among us," he said. "I thought age brought wisdom?"

But our host remained looking into Serena's odd little face without responding, and it seemed as if they spoke together thus. Proctor put one of his stubby hirsute hands on Grey's shoulder. "Age does, my dear fellow, as you no doubt will discover after you have done with blundering about in the underbrush." He continued cheerfully, "Lord Grogan is the most remarkable of the romantic philosophers, the alchemist, who makes gold out of dross."

"And what cloth of gold will you spin to enrobe the great and lesser canines?" Mrs. Markham ventured. "Do you know some charming myth about them that is kinder to our sensibilities than the sad story of Actaeon? You must lend a happier note to our stargazing."

Lord Grogan allowed that he did know a few tales, and we pressed him to comply with Mrs. Markham's request.

"Some accounts of Canis Major and Minor derive from the myth of Demeter, goddess of grain and harvest," he said. "The story of Demeter, the earth mother, is one of the oldest in Greek poetry, and some scholars believe it may therefore have come to the Greeks from a still more ancient people.

"In Greek legend, the Titans were the earth's first rulers, but they were overthrown by their children, of whom Zeus was the most powerful. In Roman legend, by the way, the Titans made their way to Italy and ruled quite happily for a time. But in Greece, the Olympians had to fight a few final skirmishes with a rear guard, Typhon, a Titan of great strength. Two lesser Titans, however, had stayed behind as friends to the Olympians, and they restored peace with a clever ruse. Advising that discretion was superior to battlefield vainglory, they persuaded the Olympians to assume the shapes of animals to avoid Typhon's wrath, which they knew would soon be ex-

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hausted, as even hurricanes grow tame after unleashing their fury. Typhon sought in vain for human forms, but saw only animals sporting on the plain, and his wrath and strength were soon harmlessly spent. The Olympians then reverted to their normal shapes, but the two lesser Titans, who had changed themselves into dogs, decided to remain transformed, seeming to prefer that existence.

"We do not know their names or if they were actually Titans, for they may have been Hyperboreans, a strange northern people who the Greeks tell us were an extraordinarily happy race. In any case, they stayed faithfully with the Olympians, having pledged to share their fate, and as dogs they became companions of Demeter, singling her out for their affection. They figure again in the story behind the Eleusinian mysteries, which are rites of Demeter, celebrations of fertility and harvest.

"Well, you know most of that story, I am sure — how Demeter's daughter, Persephone, was abducted by the lord of the underworld, Hades, the king of the dead. Demeter sensed that her daughter was in danger, but no one had the courage to tell her what had occurred. Her two hounds searched the earth to the west while she herself searched the east. For days she searched and mourned, and because she was in mourning, nothing grew on the earth, nothing flourished or bore fruit. The trees, the fields, all began to decline and die. On the ninth day, Demeter's hounds came upon the fissure in the earth that led to the underworld, and they knew Persephone had descended into the realm of death. Carrying great torches in their mouths, they too descended deep into the earth, and they found Persephone captive in Hades' palace.

"They braved the underlord on his throne and would have rescued Persephone except for one small detail. In order to leave the underworld, one must not have eaten anything while there, and Persephone had eaten a pomegranate. Demeter's hounds could not bring her out. One of them, however, stayed with Persephone, while the other returned to tell Demeter what had happened. Then Demeter in her sorrow let the earth fall into a blight, until Zeus himself had to do something, or all human life would die. Hades was forced to compromise, and Demeter drove a hard bargain. Persephone returns to the earth for all but the winter months, when she once more takes up residence in the underworld and the earth dies while Demeter mourns. And always one of Demeter's hounds goes with Persephone, while the other grieves with Demeter."

Lord Grogan here ended his story.

"It is interesting, isn't it," Dr. Markham said, "that the Eleusinian mysteries, the fertility rites, occur at harvest time, when Persephone returns to the underworld, rather than in the spring, when she returns to the earth?"

"Not strange at all," Mrs. Markham stated, "that fertility rites should preface a woman's return to her husband's bed after a protracted absence. And isn't it typical that Demeter regard her son-in-law with disfavor? Such

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is the way with mothers; they seldom approve their offspring's mate."

"Why are they called the Eleusinian mysteries?" Serena wanted to know.

Dr. Markham explained. "Their site is Eleusis, near Athens. The Eleusinians had been kind to Demeter during her search for her child, and she favored them afterward. They showed their continued gratitude with celebrations once every so many years, with pageants and processions — and sacrifices. It was a time of purification, and there were secret rites, whose participants were vowed to silence. The secrets are lost. We only know that the rites culminated in a dark hall where the participants beheld visions in splendid flashes of light."

"Cicero writes of the mysteries," said Lord Grogan. "He claims that they sweeten our natures, soften our customs, and lead us from savagery to true humanity. They show us the way to live joyfully and teach us how to die with a better hope. I have always found those words a comfort, and the mysteries surprisingly similar to Christian beliefs, for it is in this story of Demeter that we have the idea of a temporary descent into the realm of death, and an assured return to life."

This led to some discussion of comparative religion and underlying mythologies. Dr. Markham, well read and well traveled, was fully as informed as Lord Grogan on these topics, and their exempla were occasionally lively. "I heard a tale in the Balkans, quite curious — tale of the dog, so to speak. It was in one of the remote villages that I believe was in Rumania, though the hotchpotch of states and borders there makes it impossible to be certain. A dog motif is frequent in their art, and the people exhibit an almost English attitude toward dogs — quite affectionate — not at all the harsh attitude one sees in some cultures. It stands in stark contrast to the usual tales in that area of werewolves and the like. Here, the story was a reversal, and weredogs or dog-people were protectors of the village."

"Were any dog-people in the village then? Did you see any?" We all wanted to know, half laughing, half serious. But no, Dr. Markham had not seen these dog-people, though he claimed to have met an old farmer who was said to know all about them. "Did you question him? What did he say?" The farmer, however, had said nothing; he quite adamantly refused to talk on that subject, and Dr. Markham concluded that it was probably invented out of fumes from the local inn.

"Perhaps they were the Hyperboreans," Proctor said. "That special race of good people was said to live in the north, by which we have thought they meant a symbolic otherworld. But here we have the actual north, the Balkans being north of Greece. It is amazing how these legends of different cultures have their intersections."

"Or is it that we are only too ready to fabricate the connections, in our preference for superstition and romance?" I asked. "Here we are, eargerly accepting the impossible notion of dog-people. Referring to a group of people as dog-

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people, I suppose, might merely indicate they were rougher folk, less civilized, which would be of a piece with a northern and mountainous habitat. Why must mysteries have explanations that are discouragingly mundane?"

"Hyperborean does denote extreme north," Lord Grogan said. "We see the root in aurora borealis, the northern dawn or northern lights, that fabulous display in the northern heavens.

"And so we conjure up dog-people from the heavens," Mrs. Markham drawled. "We shall have to take more seriously these novels by Monsieur Jules Verne and Mr. H. G. Wells." She gave a laugh. "Dog-people, indeed."

"Odd to think of such a thing being true," Lord Grogan replied. "But the motif is curiously ancient. Consider Anubis, the Egyptian god who is half man and half dog or jackal. He was the god of embalming — the secrets of which are as lost to us as the Eleusinian mysteries. Anubis was also the guardian of tombs, and he led the dead to their final resting place. He was a protector of the dead, but also their judge."

"He weighed the human heart against the feather of truth," Serena said, as if reciting something learned a long time ago. We all regarded her with surprise.

"You and I have been reading the same books," Lord Grogan said, "and memorizing the same passages."

"I do not think it is something I read," Serena told him. "Perhaps someone told it to me." She looked thoughtful a moment, trying to recall, but Dr. Markham interrupted her thoughts.

"Coincidence rears its peculiar head once more," he said. "Anubis was the son of Osiris, and Osiris was something of a Persephone, dying each year and rising anew to ensure nature's fertility. Another coincidence, too, that harvest celebrations come under the governance of the Dog Star, which appears at the approach of autumn, for in Egypt the priests watch as well the rising of Sirius. When Sirius rose above the eastern horizon as companion of the sun, the Egyptians knew that the Nile's annual floods were approaching, and these floods ensured the fertility of the soil."

"It is all of a piece, isn't it?" Proctor remarked quietly, more to himself than to the others at table. He was quite a strange young man, taking all this seriously.

"Oh, I should like to see Sirius," his twin exclaimed energetically. "From what you say, it should be rising with the sun at this juncture of the calendar, for we are nearing harvest, and Mr. Essenden mentioned earlier that we are now in the dog days."

"We shall do even better than that," Lord Grogan told her. "I know of something that should delight you, and it is just the right time of the cycle."

Proctor gave our host a look. "The meteor display," he said, again half to himself, but Serena heard quite distinctly.

"Meteors! How fabulous!"

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"Meteors," Mrs. Markham echoed.

But neither Lord Grogan nor Proctor would explain. It was to remain a mystery at least for several hours, and we should have to keep vigil past our usual hour of retiring, in fact almost until the dawn. To make the interval less fatiguing, we repaired to the drawing room, where we passed the time with cards, reading, and music. I should have thoroughly enjoyed our amusements had not each passing hour brought home to me that both Lord Grogan and my son were rivals for Serena's affection, and that her innocent heart might be in danger from the sport.

My woolgathering ceased only with our reinstatement on the broad terrace, where we viewed a night sky brilliant with stars. It was that hour when the deep fastnesses of night, seemingly endless and unfathomable, would soon surrender to the first lightening of the sky and the promise of a new day. In the North Country, day breaks early in the warm months, and the days are long, evening only settling into its purple mantle (the one embroidered with roses) in the hour before midnight.

The evening had continued warm, but now the mild breeze gained strength, the dampness increased, and the ladies in our party assumed light wraps, the gentlemen preferring what warmth their cigars could afford. We stood in casual groups, facing the east, or what Lord Grogan promised was the east, and we waited. Expectation subdued conversation. We were unusually silent. And then we saw it, or thought we did, for it happened almost too fast for our slow human perceptions to be assured of what we saw.

"A shooting star! Oh, I saw it!" Serena was delighted. "Proctor, did you see?"

He had seen it indeed. "A meteor! And what a tail!"

"Then I suppose I did see it," I remarked. "A rapid movement of light, but so quickly done that I could not swear to having seen anything."

Lord Grogan laughed. "You shall see more," he promised. "You shall see a whole shower of meteors — so many that you will have no difficulty in attesting to the phenomenon."

"Which is it that we watch?" Dr. Markham asked, calmly smoking his cigar, completely sang-froid.

"The Canids," Lord Grogan replied. "Meteor showers take their name from whichever constellation they occur in or near. The Canid meteor shower is most closely proximate to Canis Major."

"Dogs again," commented Mrs. Markham.

"Dogs naturally," Proctor told her. "See their tails!" And with that exclamation we beheld two more meteors in immediate succession, bright trails of light lasting but a handful of seconds, a mere breath.

"There can be thousands of thousands in the space of an hour," Lord Grogan said. "These showers, fantastic as they seem, occur in predictable cycles. The Canids are visible to some extent every year at this time, but the

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cycle waxes and wanes. Every tenth year, the display is spectacular, as it is tonight. Your visit has been well timed. You see it at its best."

For three quarters of an hour we stood and watched while sometimes singly, sometimes almost paired, the meteors took brief flight. They seemed to radiate from one definite point in the sky. There were faint trails (trains, Lord Grogan called them, while the de Canises preferred to call them tails) and there were bright trails, beginning faintly but increasing in magnitude, until rather abruptly ceasing. Some trails seemed to flare up at the very end, as if their fire had been suddenly blown on but extinguished. These meteor showers astonished but did not frighten, being far more gentle than a rowdy fireworks display — kinder to humans if not to their own galaxies, for were these not explosions of considerable dimension?

Serena and Proctor stood spellbound. Those odd little faces I had once thought coarse and plain seemed in the starlight to be remarkably sensitive, fine, and noble. Raptly gazing at the meteoric wonders, their faces assumed a serenity that I had glimpsed before. I looked at Lord Grogan. He too seemed touched by this brother and sister, standing arm in arm, utterly peaceful. The peace seemed to settle onto his own countenance as he watched them watch the sky, and all his weariness of life seemed to vanish, gone like the vaporized meteor. I felt serene and content myself.

Then I caught sight of Grey, standing apart and watching, half in shadow. Jealousy and unrest marred his handsome face. I knew that expression. Not only had I seen it before in Grey's face, I recognized it all too well from its frequent appearance on my own. That had been years ago, when jealousy looked out of my own face in the mirror, taunting me and making my days a purgatory. I knew jealousy very well; we were companions of old. It had made my relations with Grey's father, and later with my husband, unbearable.

With these ghosts swirling about my mind, I gazed once again at the heavens, in time to go nearly blind from the light of one fantastic meteor that blazed up and seemed to illumine the entire sky.

And as we all blinked and started, we heard an awful, heartrending cry and were soon aware that young Proctor de Canis was writhing on the ground, his body contorted from spasms, in the pitiless grip of some terrible seizure.

Dr. Markham acted quickly. Pulling off his wife's shawl as he hastened past her, he rolled it into a cushion for the poor young man's head. I was on my knees in a moment, assisting him as best I could, and Lord Grogan, having called loudly for his servants, took a similar position. We were like the guardian angels, watching at head and hands to protect a child through the night. But for all our efforts and aspirations to help, we knew we could only wait until the seizure ran its course.

Mrs. Markham had entered the house and returned quite sensibly with a decanter of brandy and several glasses. Servants appeared and vanished, bringing blankets and pillows, smelling salts and wet cloths. All was pande-

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monium. I looked for Serena, poor child, and saw that she had turned to Grey, as she had at the railway station, and was holding fast to him. He clutched her to his breast and tried to keep her from bearing witness to her brother's disorder, but she would ever turn her head, protected as it was by Grey's sheltering arms and lapels, and view the dear young man's plight. Her anguish was anguish to behold.

At last the fit released its grip on Proctor, the spasms eased, and his body became limp. We feared then that he had left us, but Dr. Markham's ministrations soon brought a touch of healthful color to his face. Proctor opened his eyes, looking directly into mine with a weary expression in the soft depths. He seemed on the verge of speech, but his body was too weak to obey and he lay prostrate. I held his hand, that stubby cold hand, and tried to warm it. He smiled, and his face seemed the repository of peace and goodness. The fit was quite past.

Grey brought Serena to him. The poor child could barely support herself. Gently did Grey assist her to kneel at her brother's side. She kissed and petted him, soothed him, all the while the tears flooded her eyes and ran down her nose and cheeks. Again Proctor tried to speak, but with her he had no need. She sensed what it was he desired to say, and she nodded her head to him, assenting to whatever it was.

Dr. Markham directed the servants to ready Proctor's bed and return in haste to bear him there, and Lord Grogan accompanied them himself to ensure that everything to advance the young man's comfort would be done. Mrs. Markham dispensed brandy to us all, and although Serena would have abstained, Grey made her drink half the glass. I needed no such encouragement, the flash of warmth being quite welcome. The heat of the dog days had been dispersed by the cold touch of fear and our mortality.

Dr. Markham settled Proctor in a chair, and two servants thus carried him off as if he were a nabob. Serena stayed close and would have held his hand if at all possible. As it was, she held Grey's instead, for he would not leave her, and we formed an escort to the young man's door. Here, Proctor found the strength to stand and bid us good night. His manner seemed for once slightly irritated, and he begged that we would leave him. He wanted solitude and rest. Accordingly, we gave a show of withdrawing, but held the line a few yards from his closed door, waiting for Dr. Markham to assist him to his bed and give us a report. He was soon once again in the corridor. And then we heard the door bolt slide into place. Proctor had locked himself in and his ministering angels out.

Serena hastened to persuade him otherwise, but Proctor was adamant. He definitely did not want anyone to disturb him. He needed uninterrupted rest. He needed solitude and quiet. Proctor responded to Dr. Markham's reasoning no more than to his sister's pleading. The door remained shut and bolted.

His poor sister was now utterly distraught, and I suspected that, as she

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was unaccustomed to spiritous liquors, the brandy she had earlier drunk was compounding exhaustion and emotional distress and diminishing her inhibitions. She was almost as unreasonable as her brother. Lord Grogan promised Serena that someone would be outside Proctor's door all night, with leave to batter it down should there be any indication that assistance was needed within. This calmed her somewhat, and Grey and I led her to her own room, which was near enough to mine that I would hear if she were in any distress. Of this I assured Lord Grogan, who looked quite ghastly and shaken. It was intolerable to him that Serena should suffer.

We all retired to our rooms heavy with fatigue. Despite the brandy I had drunk, I could not sleep. It was the Matterhorn experience again, the tossing and turning, with no prospect this time that such tribulations would be rewarded. Sadness had gripped my heart. Serena had mentioned to us that once before, as a child, Proctor suffered just such an attack, which prompted Dr. Markham to mention, out of her hearing, that we undoubtedly witnessed a form of epilepsy. If so, Proctor's life was marked, and I wondered if the brief lives of the de Canis males might be attributable to these seizures. I wondered, too, what would become of Serena should Proctor no longer be at her side.

These somber and unhappy thoughts made rest impossible, and I was soon up once more, pacing a track into the soft carpet. Once I thought I heard Serena's door open and close, but no one passed my chamber, and she would have to go by my door to reach Proctor's room. With Proctor in my thoughts, I stepped out onto the small balcony off my chamber. From this vantage I could see the ell where Proctor's windows stood. All was dark — ironically, it was just before the dawn — and I hoped he rested comfortably.

Then it was that I seemed to be aware of a shape moving about stealthily near that part of the house, on a bit of roof extending from the first story. A cat perhaps, but if so, a very large one. Dark and the distance made it very difficult to judge. Night by now was paling into that grey state one step removed from black — for there is a difference between charcoal and coal. I could not see much, but I could see a little. The shape ran along the roof, which extended along the ell, and when it had run out of roof, it leapt onto a thick branch of oak, and I lost sight of it among the leaves.

Clouds had come in, great massy things, black and ominous, obscuring the stars. I drew my dressing gown close about me and shivered. How long I stood there I do not know, for one loses track of time spent in thought. But then, through the slightly open window of Serena's adjacent room, I heard a disturbance. At first I thought the young woman was giving vent to her sorely tried emotions. I knew I should go to her, to comfort her, but a selfish inanition stayed my steps. I was fatigued and in need of rest, I told myself; let her release her grief, for that was salutary. I sighed and remained as I was.

Suddenly, a raucous struggle broke out behind the house, in the direction of Lord Grogan's outbuildings. He had a small barnyard, occupied by fowl,

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guinea hens I thought, and there the noise seemed to originate. I could swear to hearing a great snarling among the squawks and flapping, then a great yell from a human source, and a gun's sharp crack sounded unmistakably. For the second time that night, the house was in turmoil. Lights went on, people ran about. See the excitement I must. But when I reached my door, something advised caution. Softly, I opened the door and looked out, quickly drawing back. Framed in the adjacent doorway were Serena and Grey in passionate but hasty embrace. The disarray of their garments told me all, and the noise heard earlier was explained. The disturbance out of doors had flushed Grey from this covey and he was off, arranging his clothes on the run, to see what had occurred. I heard his footsteps down the hall, fading around the corner, and then I heard the slight rustle of a muslin nightgown and a very soft voice spoke my name.

Puzzled, I opened my door full wide. Serena stood there, flushed, her hair a glorious mass of unruly tresses. "I cannot possibly explain. I could not help it. I think you must understand," she said.

"Do not look so alarmed, my dear," I told her. How odd that she should feel compelled to come to me at such a time. The wings of the past seemed to lightly brush my shoulder, and I felt as if I beheld myself as a young woman, confused by passion, struggling toward reason. "You owe neither apologies nor explanations, not to anyone. Remember that." Another bit of advice occurred to me. "And I think, my dear, you must in the future think twice before touching brandy."

We were late to breakfast that morning, the events of the night having kept us to our beds, hoarding remnants of sleep. The mood at table was sullen. Only the young emerge unharmed from a sleepless night, and none of the young had yet come down.

Despite our tardiness, the kitchen staff was ill-prepared for our needs. Instead of the usual feast at the sideboard, there was famine and cold tea. The Markhams had descended before me, and when I entered, Mrs. Markham was scowling deeply, her husband sheltering within the morning daily. Frequently, Mrs. Markham addressed a remark his way. His response was a brief rustling of the pages. Provided with a fresh audience, she soon told me of the inadequacies of Lord Grogan's household staff.

"Lord Grogan is off cajoling them now. An attack of nerves in one's staff is ridiculous. They are not hired for their sensibilities. There are to remain insensible of their own nerves in times of crisis, or how should anything get done?"

At this juncture one of the maids appeared bearing a tea tray. Extremely pale and nervous she looked, this usually stolid local girl. The tea things rattled, and I saw that her hands were trembling. In setting down the tray, several cups tumbled about. Mrs. Markham objected sharply to this clumsiness and quickly banished the servant, who seemed only too happy to retreat.

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"Foolish nonsense," Mrs. Markham declaimed.

"Most nonsense is foolish, my dear," her husband said, putting down the paper and giving me one of his mutedly ardent glances.

"Superstitious twaddle," she said firmly. Ignoring the husband, I asked for enlightenment of the wife and was promptly gratified. It seemed that the disturbance I had heard, the logical explanation of which was that some animal had raided Lord Grogan's hen house, was being perceived among the servants as a supernatural omen. Before Mrs. Markham could be forthcoming with details, we heard Lord Grogan's angry voice in the hall. He was arguing with one of his groundskeepers, who was apparently unwilling to be argued down. North Country people are sturdily independent.

Flushed with doubtful victory, Lord Grogan strode into the breakfast room. We all regarded him speculatively, and he was uncomfortably aware of our unspoken questions.

"The fellow wants to go hunting after the poor animal," he said.

"Hardly a poor animal," said Dr. Markham.

"Can one hunt down a ghost?" Mrs. Markham asked coolly, her composure somewhat regained since she had had her tea.

"Ghost?" I said, greatly surprised.

"Ghostly presence, I suppose one would say. Or supernatural being."

"Nonsense," said Dr. Markham.

"Precisely what I said," his wife reminded him. "At least this groundsman, unlike the rest of your people, is sensible enough to realize that whatever attacked your hens was flesh and blood, and therefore eminently shootable."

"A wolf, I should think," said the doctor.

"No, no," Lord Grogan replied gruffly, as if to say here was nonsense indeed. "Probably a neighbor's dog got loose."

"But why should anyone consider even for a moment that there is the slightest element of the supernatural involved?" I asked.

"The gytrash," Dr. Markham said, adding a soupcon of drama to his words. Lord Grogan remained silent, so we pressed for explanations from our ready source.

"The gytrash is a legendary beast," he told us.

"I never heard of such a creature," I said.

"It seems to be a regional phenomenon, a North Country spectre, though it does have a reference in a source you are familiar with, the novel *Jane Eyre*. There is a scene on the moors, you will recall, in which Rochester's dog comes suddenly out of the mists and startles the heroine, whereupon she thinks it may be the gytrash."

"What an odd name. So extraordinarily peculiar and unique."

"Yes, the derivation seems quite occluded," the doctor continued. "My theory is that it may combine the Scots word *gyte*, meaning mad, and a North Country word *trash*, which refers to a dog lead. You may have heard that

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groundsman several days ago telling one of his men to fetch a dog-trash. I suspect it is a form of the word *trace* — you know, the hounds of spring are on winter's traces."

"The gytrash — it is the hound of the Baskervilles come to life!" exclaimed Mrs. Markham.

"My dear?"

"Think of it, if you can remove your head from those etymological excavations. The footsteps of a giant hound, that is what they saw, don't you remember? In the Sherlock Holmes story, near the body of whatever Baskerville it was, there was the footprint of a giant hound, as there was near your hen house, Lord Grogan. I heard the servants gossiping this morning. They were near delirious with fright at the size of a strange animal's footprint. And now the talk is all of this immense creature, this spectral hound."

I turned to Lord Grogan. "Was there a paw print? That would seem to explain events."

He paused before responding. "There was a print."

"A large dog's, surely."

Again he paused. "I do not know," he finally admitted. "I never saw anything like it in my life."

"Oh, but —"

"There!" Mrs. Markham exclaimed.

"Your groundsman could not identify it?"

"No."

"But still," I pursued, "why should your servants assume it to be supernatural, and why so terrified even if it were a ghostly spectre of some sort?"

"One of the men saw the creature."

"What does he say it looked like?"

"He couldn't say. He saw a large dark shape. He heard the commotion in the yard, thought someone was stealing hens, and went to confront the thief. He was peering round a corner when some large animal sprang at him, and in his fright his gun discharged. He never got a clear look at the beast."

"That hardly sounds like an encounter with a ghost."

"No, and Weller is convinced he can track the animal and shoot it."

"But the others — why do they think otherwise?"

"Old superstitions. The farm animals have been excessively restless several nights in succession. They read that as a sign. Then the strange mark — probably just a scuffed print. With all the tramping about in the ruckus, I doubt if what we saw was a clear print. One of my men no doubt added a toeprint to that of the beast's."

"It is all logically explained away," I said.

"Such things always can be," Dr. Markham noted. "Still, these tales persist, and Lord Grogan's staff would of course be uneasy. You see, in the legend of the gytrash, the beast makes its startling appearance to announce an

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impending death.

Neither Serena nor Proctor came down to breakfast. Lord Grogan personally rapped at Proctor's door, whereupon the young man opened it slightly. Seeing him flushed and feverish, Lord Grogan wanted Dr. Markham to attend him, but Proctor demurred. Claiming he needed but rest, the young man abruptly closed the door.

Serena kept to her room as well. Grey I had not seen except to glimpse him from the window. He stood on the lawn in earnest conversation with the groundsman, Weller, and I saw them walk off together.

I repaired to my room, there being little to interest me elsewhere in the house. One of those metaphoric palls was draped over the household. I had not been long in my room when a light tap sounded at the door and I heard Serena's slightly gruff voice, her strange little voice.

"Mrs. Essenden? Mrs. Essenden?"

Instantly, I opened the door to her. Restive anguish was apparent in her every gesture, though she was calmer than when I had last seen her. "My dear," I said, my heart going out to her. I doubted she had slept at all. I drew her in and led her to a small sofa, insisting she recline there, although she was too fraught with emotion to seriously rest.

"I feel I must speak with someone," she said. "Proctor is so ill, and I do not want to worry him. I do not want to worry him, but I do not understand what happened to me last night. I have never felt so, so —" She had no way to describe her feeling; the emotions of the night fell into no category she had previously known. "I think, Mrs. Essenden, that it must be the Dog Star. Perhaps we have all gone mad." The poor child made little sense in her agitation. "I know Proctor must rest, but I should feel so much better if I could just sit by him."

"You must sit by me instead, Serena, and let me help you. I have a draught of something from Mrs. Markham, something that would help you sleep." But Serena rejected sleep. She must talk, though she let me persuade her to accept some tea, and I promptly rang for the maid.

All the servants were remarkably fond of the de Canises, and when the tea things arrived, I saw that the cook had prepared a collection of delicacies, hoping to tempt Serena into taking sustenance. The maid and I called her attention to the carefully prepared tray, whereon lay trim sandwiches and tea cakes festooned liberally with geranium petals and leaves. By stressing that the cook's feelings would undergo injury if she took nothing, we persuaded Serena to eat, and the maid departed with the news that Miss Serena had taken one sandwich and half a tea cake and was sipping her tea.

Somewhat restored, Serena spoke of what was uppermost in her thoughts. Her brother's name was the first word from her lips. I reassured her as best I could, but her intelligence and quick empathy told her the truth of Proctor's

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situation. But Proctor was on his feet, I reminded her, when he spoke with Lord Grogan. He must be regaining strength. She considered this, and her face became less grave. It was not only Proctor's condition that worried her, however, and she again regarded me somberly.

"Proctor wants me to marry Lord Grogan," she said.

It took me a moment to grasp this, and I could not exactly fathom what my own reaction was to this news. "Do you want to marry Lord Grogan?"

"Proctor says that I must marry someone like Lord Grogan. He is afraid that he will not be with me very long and that I will be all alone, without protection, without love and companionship." Sadly she regarded me. "I feel that this is so." Here, she broke down into weeping. "If Proctor were to die, Mrs. Essenden, I do not know what I would do, and I become so frightened."

I put my arms around her trembling frame. I told her Proctor would be with her for a good many years. I told her she was strong. In brief, I lied to her flagrantly, for Proctor clearly bore the de Canis curse of a life that would be tragically shortened, and as for Serena's strength, I feared she was too good, too innocent, to travel unscathed through life. There would be those who would prey upon her, use her, and break her dear loving heart.

"I think," I said to her, my arm still about her, "that you might be quite happy if you were to marry someone like Lord Grogan. He is a good man, very kind." She spoke not a word. My own feelings seemed a bit in disorder. How to continue? I studied this poor frightened child. "He loves you, my dear. I believe you know that. You seem to know so many things implicitly."

She did not move but sat very still, as if she had not heard. What now? "I think that you do love him," I said. "I do not think you would consider marrying someone you did not love." In an absolute quandary, I tried calmly to pat her hand, though I felt very much in need of reassurance for myself.

"I have this feeling, Mrs. Essenden," she said then, speaking slowly, as if groping for each word that should exactly capture what she needed to express. "I have had this feeling about you, from the moment we met — on the train, you remember. You and I are linked in some way. I know no more than that, if I can even say I know that. It seems so shadowy an impression, but not fleeting." She smiled, her spirits momentarily resurgent from the gloom that had enthralled them. "This feeling has never left me from the day we met, Mrs. Essenden. It cheers me." She rose and clasped my hands in hers. "I feel so close to you. And you are so strong."

Beauty suffused this dear child's face. Such a plain face, one thought, until moments such as this. Her radiance quite stole away my thoughts, and I could only murmur, "My dear child, Serena, my dear." We remained there for a time, peacefully sitting with the tea things nearby, Serena kneeling by my chair, her head resting softly against my knee, as if she were a child listening to fairy stories. I smoothed her wild hair, and we both enjoyed this reservoir of calm.

After a time she spoke again. "Lord Grogan is very good?" she asked,

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seeking my assurance. I told her his qualities, both general and specific, for he was an excellent man, possessing great integrity, conscience, and charity. I related many anecdotes supporting his character, including several of the humorous stories that showed him to be decidedly human, not an untouchable paragon. Serena absorbed all this, then asked, "You and he were lovers, were you not?" Her question was direct, though she glanced shyly away, and a rosiness gently lent color to her face. My answer was equally direct.

"Yes, Lord Grogan and I were lovers."

"But you are lovers no more?" She looked at me with her soft eyes, seeming to say, "I would spare you injury if I could."

"We have not been lovers for years."

Gently she persisted. "Do you love him?"

Finally, I understood where her questions tended. "My dear, I have no prior claim. Lord Grogan and I are friends. I believe I ceased to regard him as a lover when I met my late husband. Lord Grogan I would guarantee had a similar occurrence upon his own marriage. There is free love and there is married love, and they seem not to cross boundaries. One would never marry the object of one's free love. That would go against the terms. We must not upset the logic."

"What of passion, Mrs. Essenden? Does that cross the boundaries?"

"Passion would seem to have more to do with free love, wouldn't it?" I said. "With the right marriage partner, however, one can have the best of all possible worlds."

She hesitated, then said, "Lord Grogan does not seem very passionate. Not like —" In some confusion, she left this unfinished.

"Lord Grogan believes in compartmentalizing," I told her. "Behavior suitable for the bedroom is not to be displayed in an inappropriate setting."

"And what of indiscretions, Mrs. Essenden? Would he not then blame me for —" Again she broke off.

"Lord Grogan is a man of the world, my dear. And as one who supports the equality of the sexes, he would never proscribe behavior for a woman that he condoned for a man." I reminded her that Lord Grogan loved her, whereupon she smiled, her smile one of innocent delight, like a child at the pantomime.

"You would not mind, then, if I were to marry him?"

"My dear, for most of my life I have never truly loved anyone but myself. I never loved Lord Grogan as you love him, nor did he love me as he loves you. Your love is one of steadfast attachment and a surrender of the ego that I am unwilling to face. I would say that you should definitely marry Lord Grogan."

"And what of Grey?" she asked softly. She studied me closely then. Once more she seemed to say, "I would spare you injury if I could."

"Has he made any declaration to you?" I asked in surprise. "Has he been saying things he should not?"

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"No, he has said nothing." She hesitated, not sure how to proceed. "But his feelings for me, I think he does care for me. I should not like to hurt him. After last night — oh! I must have been mad! But I am so drawn to him, to his beauty, his strength. Yet I do not understand myself, how I felt last night, how I feel now. It seems so changed. Should I say something to him, so he will understand?"

I dismissed this. She and Grey could share nothing but an animal attraction — nothing to take seriously — a mild attack of youthful passion, soon to release its hold. "A lady does not bring up such things," I told her. "You must say nothing to Grey on the subject. After all, in polite society a lady is expected to be cruel to her beaux."

Serena did not see the irony, and in fact seemed to think I was serious. "I am only teasing you, my dear. Pay no mind. You must not fret about Grey. You were both overcome with the emotions that last night's events called forth. He will get over it. It is mere puppy love, if that. It lasts a moment and life goes on."

But Serena continued to worry about him, I could see. Only later did I learn she was right to worry. I learned too, later, that I had little experience with genuine passion, that I had led a rather tepid life after all, and could not rightly affix superlatives to any of it.

Proctor was sufficiently recovered to come downstairs later in the day, and Serena was elated. She fussed over him and clung to him, and he cheerfully showed his appreciation. Although he was pale, the fever had abated, and his spirits seemed to have reverted to original form. Gone was the irritability. He was charming and ebullient once more — all the more tragic in light of our knowledge of his prospects. Lord Grogan, Dr. Markham, and I exchanged sober glances, but to Serena we were encouraging, not wanting to cause her any further anguish.

Watching Proctor subject to his sister's ministrations, we were relieved to see him grow stronger with each passing hour. The engaging young man had returned to us. In mock solemnity he invalided himself to a chaise, where he allowed Serena to pile innumerable cushions at his head and suffered her to place a rug across his knees. From this vantage, he begged for entertainment, and was especially pleased to have Serena and Lord Grogan station themselves at the piano and sing duets. They sang old country songs, sad and gay. Now that I knew what was in the young man's mind, or rather in his heart — for he wanted his sister to be happy and protected above all else — I realized why he was so very pleased whenever Lord Grogan and Serena were together. With my recently acquired insight, I realized how blind I was previously to this increasing attachment. Oh, I had seen the affection growing up on both sides, but I had failed to see how serious it was.

Mrs. Markham clearly disapproved and regarded the couple with increas-

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ingly sour glances. When they had finished a particularly romantic song, lingering over the last notes, she could refrain no longer.

"Where is Grey Essenden?" she asked loudly, abruptly. "He was hanging after you like a puppy last night, Miss de Canis, but you seem to have been abandoned by your swain. Did you have a lovers' quarrel?"

Serena blushed and looked at Lord Grogan. Discomfitted by the remark, he searched Serena's countenance. Neither could allay the other's fears.

"I say," Proctor suddenly announced, and he rose from his chair with troubled mien. Then it was that we heard the commotion out of doors — voices hallooing, dogs barking and baying, servants rushing about. Immediately, we sought the source of all this furor.

Out on the lawn, Grey and the groundsman, Weller, stood proudly, bearing a brace of pheasant and the carcass of a large fox. These poor creatures were stone dead and smeared with blood, their once quick eyes now dull, empty — to me that emptiness is the saddest consequence of death. Callously, these men tossed their bounty onto the ground, growling to the dogs to keep back. The dogs ran nervously back and forth with noses sniffing the air, eyes white as if in panic. They were not trained in the hunt. Lord Grogan forbade any hunting, and now Lord Grogan was in a fury.

"How dare you!" he exclaimed, almost thrusting his face into that of Weller. "This is against all my wishes, all my orders."

The man was obdurate. "Only way to protect the hens," he said.

"Fences protect the hens," Lord Grogan sputtered.

"Didn't last night, though, did they?" he replied.

"We will build better fences," Lord Grogan countered.

"Pah!" the man said, and spat on the gound, giving a sideways glance at Grey as if they shared a joke.

"Take these poor creatures away," Lord Grogan commanded sternly. "I cannot understand nor condone your savagery toward that vixen," he said. "And what possible excuse have you for killing those birds? Have they undertaken some avian conspiracy against guinea fowl?"

"Oh, I shot those," Grey said coolly.

"You? Whatever in the world! You know my feelings on the matter of killing innocent creatures."

"Oh yes. But you see, I couldn't resist the sport. Your man has an excellent set of guns. Not a shot was wasted."

Serena stared in excruciating horror at the scene, shivering and wide-eyed. At his words, she looked at Grey uncomprehendingly. It was at this point that Proctor, who had drawn nearer and nearer to the grotesque sight in fascination, sniffed in revulsion, was swept with nausea, and had to be carried back to the house.

I could not shake free thereafter from a sense of disquiet and foreboding.

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Few of us seemed unaffected, the prevailing mood splintering us into estrangements. The Markhams continued their typical sang-froid, with the doctor well disposed toward everyone but his wife. Lord Grogan was generally annoyed, predominately by Grey, his brusqueness covering over a sore spot, for he imagined that so handsome and cool a young man might prove more able than himself at winning a young woman's affections. His imaginings should have been easily dispelled because Serena avoided Grey, repulsed by the blood on his hands, which had not been entirely metaphoric, but Lord Grogan had not sufficient self-indulgence to concede where Serena's affections had in fact taken hold. Grey, on the other hand, had too much self-indulgence to realize they had loosed their hold on himself. Deluding himself that Serena was all coyness, he spent his attentions on Mrs. Markham, who soaked them in like a bath sponge, although she was quite aware of her role. She knew she was to provoke Serena's jealousy, and she hoped that by promoting the course of love between Serena and Grey, she would derail any prospects with Lord Grogan.

Such parlor games soon wear thin, and while we changed into our dinner clothes, I longed to be able to change our natures as easily as our dress. As I descended Lord Grogan's grand staircase, my humor was somewhat refreshed to see Proctor capering about in the main hall, performing gaily turned pirouettes and arabesques in a surprising recovery of strength and spirits.

"Your dancing master would no doubt tell you to practice," I said, laughing at his ballet. "And Dr. Markham would counsel complete rest."

The young man rushed up to me with the happiest expression I had ever seen on his countenance. Taking my hands in his, he clicked his heels together as he had done when first we met, and this time he actually kissed both of my hands with great fervor. This being apparently too tame an effusion, he soon kissed me on both cheeks, beaming at me proudly, as if he or I were a French officer, bestowing or receiving a medal.

Proctor soon informed me of the cause for his joy. Lord Grogan had spoken to him at last. At last they had reached an understanding. I could only imagine the scene between Henry and this remarkable young fellow, but they had settled it, and Lord Grogan was now with Serena, walking with her in the rose garden, plighting his troth. What had prompted him to finally act, I could not say. Whether of his own desperate courage, or Proctor's kind help, it scarcely mattered. It was done. I felt happy for them of course, yet a niggling doubt fettered my emotions. But what could possibly be wrong? I was becoming foolish. It was all this superstitious talk of the gytrash.

When the Markhams came down, along with Grey, Proctor and I kept them entertained with chitchat. No, we had not seen Lord Grogan. We believed Serena to be in her room.

Thus we dissembled until the missing pair entered, smiling happily and, I think, not seeing anyone or anything before them.

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We dined, we conversed, although two among us seemed remarkably inattentive to what was said. Then I saw that the announcement was coming. Lord Grogan had his best champagne brought in and the tall glasses filled. Each of us, even the abstinent de Canises, had glass in hand, waiting. Lord Grogan, with a look at once grave yet excessively pleased, nodded at Proctor, who then turned to Serena. Apparently receiving some unspoken prompt from his sister, he rose to his feet. Serena regarded him happily, proudly. They were happy for and in each other, which put the rest of us to shame.

"It falls to me, ladies and gentlemen, on a very auspicious occasion, to propose a toast," he began. "To the very kindest of hosts, Lord Grogan," and here he paused to look round at us all, but his eyes returned to Serena and remained there while he finished his speech. "And to my sister, Serena, who will soon be his wife."

It still surprised me that they had reached agreement so soon, but then, their hearts were warmer than mine. The thought crossed my mind that perhaps I should have warned Grey, told him something to lessen the shock. My eyes turned toward Grey. He was ghastly pale and staring. Macbeth seeing the lately dispatched Banquo at his table could not have stared so. Then rage overtook him, his face filled with blood hatred, his features distorted in the fury of his wounded passion. He rose, flung down his glass, and was gone, leaving us speechless. My eyes followed his tense back as he strode off.

We said not a word, not a one of us. Our glasses stood like self-conscious sentinels on the table. Blood pounded in my ears, and I could hear only that.

I looked at Henry, who returned my look with one of concern, but not for himself. His concern was all for me, and Grey. Serena, Proctor, Henry — all studied me, trying to read on my countenance and in my demeanor what was to be done. Of the Markhams I took no note. Serena stood and came to me, encircling me with her arms and placing her dear head on my shoulder. Tears dropped from her eyes onto my hands, which were folded on my lap as if in prayer. My hands might know how to pray, but I did not. Nor did I know what I felt. There was numbness, except for the pounding of my own blood in my ears, which was sound more than sensation. Grim shadows closed about me.

I do not know how long I sat there, unseeing, unmoving, strangely numb. But then, a powerful light seemed to surround me, as if the meteor shower had again blanked the sky with its white ferocious light. Then there was a rustling sound that scattered away the pounding in my ears, the violent light dispersed into the softer illumination of the lamps, and I realized that I was sitting alone at the table. Everyone else had gone away.

The loneliness panicked me and I fled the room, but protection was not far removed. Proctor stood guard in the hall. When I emerged, he came to me, sorrowful at my discomfort. So miserable did he seem that I patted his head to console him.

"A turn in the garden, Mrs. Essenden," he suggested.

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"Shouldn't you rest?"

"Oh, I am in fine form," he said. "Nothing like complete happiness to cheer a fellow up, you know." With this and sundry pleasantries he led me out of the manor and onto the walk.

It was beastly hot this evening. No delicately cooling zephyrs brought relief. All was still. We walked off the path, into the sheltering darkness, hoping for some cooler air, but even the trees seemed to have retained the heat of the day.

"Even the owls and crickets seem to have given up," I remarked. "It is absolutely soundless."

"They will speak again when they are accustomed to our presence," said Proctor. We both stood listening. It seemed important to us both that the creatures should make their usual racket. At last they did, and we heard distant frogs as well.

"Mrs. Essenden, I must speak with you, confidentially, if you please. It would mean a very great deal to me if I could be frank."

"By all means," I told him, though I was hesitant to hear his confidences. The world had turned peculiar lately.

He may have sensed my reluctance, for he paused interminably, but at last he broke the silence, just as the night creatures of the forest had done. "I am concerned about Serena," he said.

"She will be perfectly happy with Lord Grogan. No better man lives on this earth."

"Yes," he mused. "As men go, he is exceptional, isn't he? I felt from the very first, with him, that no better human was to be found." He lapsed once more into studied silence.

"Then what is your concern?"

He sighed. "That I may possibly not live to see their union."

It was said matter-of-factly, but I could sense the deep concern that held him, wracked him. "Surely —"

"I am not in the best of health, Mrs. Essenden, you know," he said lightly. Then more seriously, "You do know. I have remarkably excellent hearing, so that Dr. Markham's consultations with yourself and Lord Grogan did not escape me. And in any case, I have enough sense about these things to realize what is in store for me."

"But surely —"

"I am a creature of my past," he said. "I am in the grip of the same forces that held the previous generations of my family. They could not escape their bonds. Neither can I."

"These seizures, then — the condition is inherited?" I asked as gently as I could.

"Yes, although not quite as you think. You are a woman of great strength, Mrs. Essenden, with great clarity of mind. Events may soon occur here that

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will challenge us all, and I should rest easier if I knew that I could depend on you to assist Serena."

"I will do anything that becomes necessary, my dear boy. I give you my word."

"You should not be asked to swear blindly, yet I do not see how I can possibly explain."

"You have no need to explain. I understand perfectly," I said, but he seemed not to be satisfied with this.

"We are different, Serena and I," he told me. "Not like the people around us."

"You are rare creatures, indeed. And I would not have you any other way," I said fondly, taking his stubby hand in mine. His hand was exceedingly warm. I touched his brow. "You are feverish. Or is it this provoking heat?"

"Fever most likely, you know," he said. "It is the Dog Star. It affects me so. Has done since I was a child. Serena feels it too, although apparently not as strongly as I do. She does not know about it. I have never told her. I thought I could protect her, you see, and I was never quite certain, not until the meteor shower. Every tenth year there is the meteor shower. I had thought to combat it if it came about. I was not entirely certain that it would come to pass. I had only the charts and the stories, and it all seemed so improbable. But then, it was Aristotle, you know, who said that probability embraces the possibility of much that is improbable.

The dear boy was rambling and I feared delirium. "We must go back now," I said to him. "You must lie down."

He obediently turned back with me, but continued his discourse. "It brings out the dark side of our nature," he said. "Drawing it out almost as one draws out impurities. I have tried fighting it, resisting letting those dark forces come out, but in the end it matters not a whit. There is the excitement, too. I cannot describe the ordeal, the sensations, the utter thrill. Serena feels it too, but not so powerfully. She does not know all that I know about it. She never studied the charts as I did. She does not know the stories."

I led him by the hand. "It is almost time now," he said, and suddenly arresting his steps, he gripped my arm tightly, facing me with a frightened expression. "I fear for Serena. You must not leave her alone tonight. Promise me."

"Of course, if you wish it."

"No, no, you must swear it. I need your oath. Swear that you will not leave her side, not until the sun has risen and the light has chased away the dark side."

He was quite distraught, in the grip of delirium, and I gave him my solemn vow to watch over Serena, repeating his words as if they were a secret pledge. His deep, evocative brown eyes searched mine. "You must be true to us," he said. "I can trust only you."

"I will not forsake your trust," I assured him, and finally I meant it, sens-

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ing that his madness only masked a prescience that it would be wise not to ignore.

Reaching the manor, Proctor went immediately to his room and once more locked himself within, explaining rather gruffly that he needed undisturbed rest. At any knock on his door, he growled at the offender to leave him be. Serena came to me in tears.

"He will not let anyone near him. What am I to do? Do you think he is so very ill?"

"A good night's rest is what he needs," I counseled her. There would be no stargazing this night, not for any of us, even though the meteor shower was to provide a spectacular display again in the hours preceding dawn. None of us had the heart for such things.

It would be another debacle as far as sleep was concerned, I was convinced. But I would honor my promise to Proctor, keeping by Serena through the night, which would no doubt require sitting sleepless and uncomfortable in a narrow armchair till morning. Therefore, attired for bed, secure in warm robe and slippers, I presented myself at her door, ready for anything. She eagerly accepted my companionship and volunteered her bed, but I insisted upon the narrow armchair. Discomfort would keep me wakeful for the watch.

Even so, I drifted to sleep, starting awake after what must have been the passage of many hours. My back was stiff and one arm almost lifeless. Rubbing the afflicted member to restore its usefulness, I looked toward the bed. Serena was not there. Up I jumped, complaining aloud because of the pain that sudden motion caused my stiffened back, and then I saw her, pacing the dark area between her bed and the windows. She had drawn aside the curtains, but the sunrise was yet ensnared by night.

Her extreme agitation sent me to my room to hunt up Mrs. Markham's draught mixture. Hastening back to Serena, I pressed it on her. "You must rest. You are upset because you are exhausted." She pushed me away. Far from exhibiting exhaustion, she seemed to be drawing on a reservoir of remarkable energy. She paced the room like an animal along a forest floor, moaning and gnashing her teeth. I had never seen her in such a savage state. Indeed, I had never seen anyone, man or woman, behave so.

"I do not comprehend," she would say to me. "I do not know what is happening to me. Can I be going mad?"

Fearing for her safety under such apparent stress, I resorted to trickery. Under the guise of an innocent glass of water, which she quaffed eagerly, the sleeping draught was administered. It took no immediate effect, and I inwardly assaulted Mrs. Markham's probity, and then her sense. But I had at least coaxed Serena into a chair, where she sat alternately wringing her hands and wrenching at her gown.

Leaving her side for a moment, I searched the clothes press for a robe or

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shawl with which to warm her, for her delicate frame shivered uncontrollably. We were thus at opposite ends of the room when a light tapping sounded at the door.

I could see Serena in the mirror. She started up, poised like a startled animal, her quaint, strange face eager and listening.

"Serena," a voice pronounced softly. "Serena, let me in."

My heart grew cold in measured anger, for I recognized Grey's voice at the door. Still watching Serena's reflection in the mirror, I saw her stand and face the door, her whole body quivering from excitement and strained nerves. A look of complete abandon transfigured her features, changing them from their strange noble beauty into something coarse and hard. She seemed a denizen of the demimonde. Shocked by what I saw, whether the trick of a distorting glass or no, and furious with Grey's presumption, I sped to the door and slipped the bolt in place.

"Serena?" Grey asked, and he tried the door. Finding it locked to him, he rapped angrily. "Serena!" he said with a harsh commanding tone.

She ran toward the door, but I interposed myself, wrapping her in a shawl and pinioning her arms. She struggled with me, and I feared she would best me, for she was remarkably powerful for one so slight.

Wild as an animal she dashed herself against me, dashing us both against the clothes press, her teeth flashing. Those white teeth were all I could see of her face in that dark area of the room. She seemed unable to speak, but in trying to say Grey's name, she gave out with her guttural sounds, "Grr. . . , Grr. . . ."

"Serena," I said sharply. "Come to your senses."

Once more I was thrown against the clothes press, shattering the mirror and receiving a painful blow to the head, which made me surrender my hold. I sank down, stunned and exhausted, expecting her to fly to the door and unlatch it, but she too sank down to the floor, where she remained breathing heavily. The sleeping draught had taken effect at last.

The room was still except for our labored breathing, mine in ungainly rasps, Serena's more steady in her forced sleep. Grey had given up his post at the unyielding door. Warm from my exertions, I went to the window for air, but there was nary a breeze, the air outside as warm as that within. "Dog days, indeed," I muttered.

I looked out, for the night was peaceful at least, going quietly into the morning. The sky was covered over with pale grey clouds in billowing scallops, like a vast Austrian curtain gusseted with the early rose and magenta of imminent sunrise. Here and there, this celestial curtain opened to a window of clear sky, revealing the heavens as a smooth pale silk, the earth black fustian. And here in heavens that seemed almost too pale to show off any celestial orb, I saw a wondrously bright star close to the horizon. It shone a lovely blue-white, this glittering and mysterious entity. What can we know of the

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stars? I felt a yearning and yet a peace within myself. I had stood by Serena, for once thinking more of another being's welfare than my own. This was not a regular occurrence in my life. Still, given the discomforts of the evening, it was an event whose recurrence I would willingly postpone.

Suddenly from without, there was a clatter and a ruckus. Dogs were barking, men shouting. I heard movement below but could see hardly a thing; it was all so shadowy. I thought I saw a large, dark shape running toward a near copse, but then so many shapes were running about that I could not tell what I had seen or not seen. In my strained concentration, I was startled to hear a voice at my ear.

"Mrs. Essenden," it said faintly. Serena stood there, dazed and weary. "I have had the most peculiar dream."

The dear child remembered nothing of the night's dark excitements. She was the tender innocent once more. Blaming Mrs. Markham's powders for the strange transformation I had witnessed, I vowed not to dispense drugs so cavalierly in the future.

We peered out at the commotion out of doors, and suddenly Serena drew in her breath sharply, as if struck a blow. At precisely that moment a shot reverberated, then another in quick succession, and then I heard a most pitiful sound as some poor terrified creature wailed in mortal anquish.

The morning was cracked open, spilling forth scurrying nocturnal spectres and phantasms, as pandemonium leapt from Pandora's box. Lights were on in numerous rooms of the house, a groundskeeper appeared from nowhere and ran toward the park, two partially dressed servants emerged from the house but knew not in which direction to proceed. And all the while the pitiful crying was heard.

Serena stood near me, her breast rising and falling in extreme fright, her large brown eyes terrified. In the weak morning light I could see every feature on her face, and each feature revealed her terror. She then fled the room, her delicate nightgown covered only by the thin shawl I had earlier wrapped around her. She looked quite wild, her beautiful hair loose and streaming as she ran.

Hurriedly, I struggled into some clothes, unwilling to venture forth so ill-clad as Serena. While I struggled, pulling and buttoning, cursing women's drapery, the anguished cries abated and ceased. As heartbreaking as it was to hear that cry, its cessation seemed to take the life out of me.

I peered out the window. Serena was a pale, distinct figure on the lawn. "Where? Oh, where!" she cried out. Her head was inclined this way and that as she listened. She seemed even to sniff the air, as I had seen her do on countless occasions, trying to imbibe impressions through all the senses.

Lord Grogan reached her, and she grasped his arms despairingly. "He is hurt. Blood. There is blood."

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Quickly, I ran through the hall, down the great stairs, and around to the side lawn. Lord Grogan now had hold of Serena, who would have broken free and run into the woods had I not reached them then.

Henry stood there in a dressing gown thrown over his shirt and trousers. "My dear, you must go back to the house," he told her. "You do not want to upset yourself further."

"My brother, my brother," she said urgently to us.

"My dear, it is an animal," Lord Grogan tried to calm her. "Undoubtedly the one that has been after my fowl. The groundsman must have shot it."

Dr. Markham had just come up to us. "A damned poor shot," he said. "That creature sounds most frightfully wounded, almost human." We could tell from Lord Grogan's face what he thought of the groundsman, but he forebore speaking any hard words lest they further upset Serena.

She tried desperately to tear away from us, but we restrained her for her own sake. Henry gave a look imploring my assistance, and I tried to calm her using what poor words I could, placing a gentle hand on her arm. Her skin was like ice, she was so lightly dressed, and my hands were shaking so that I doubted they would calm anyone.

People were still running about as if the house were afire, shouting and gesturing, but as if on cue, they all at once fell silent. We distinguished then a long, hopeless moan and a faint threshing noise coming from the copse. A handful of servants were over there with lanterns, searching where the sun's rays had not yet penetrated. The creature fell silent once more, and Serena gave up struggling against us. She stood utterly unmoving, listening, frozen into a terrible stillness. "Proctor," she screamed. "Proctor!" A chill gripped my soul, her cry was so heartrending.

Henry was almost wild then, and tried to reassure her. "No, my child, it was an animal, the creature after my fowl."

"No! No!" she wailed, and she fell senseless in Lord Grogan's arms. He bore her away into the house.

Dr. Markham roused himself and strode quickly toward the copse, just as one of the men emerged gesturing wildly. A two-second conference, and Dr. Markham dispatched him toward the house at full gallop, while the doctor himself raced into the woods. As the man neared me, I could see he was in a panic.

"What is it?" I asked, but he would not delay to reply. He continued his race toward the manor.

Another man emerged from the copse, this one, too, running toward the house. "What is it?" I tried again. This man stopped, but he seemed confused and would not say. Looking back toward the copse, I saw Grey coming slowly toward us. The man looked back as well, and seeing Grey, he respectfully excused himself to me and said he must find Lord Grogan. I could not make him stay.

Grey approached as in a daze. He moved with painful caution, his body

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seemingly weighted almost beyond its capacity to bear. He appeared so little aware of anything about him I thought he would walk right by, but when he came even with me, he stopped. His face was ghastly. He seemed unmanned by the horror in the woods.

The first man to have emerged from the copse now ran past us to return there, Dr. Markham's medical bag clutched in his hand. Grey watched the man reenter the woods.

"It's Proctor," he said. "I have killed him."

As he turned to me, the pain in his eyes was more than I could bear. Desolation overwhelmed me, first when I saw his eyes, then in a second wave when I realized what he said.

"I was shooting at some animal," he continued, his voice dull and lifeless. "I wanted to shoot at something, I was in such a temper, and it was after Grogan's fowl, I thought." He was trying to make sense of it. "I shot and must have wounded it. You must have heard the cries. I have never in my life heard such awful cries. I followed to finish it, but I could not find it. Then it went quiet. We were all trying to find it. They brought lanterns. It was so dark among the trees. Then I heard that moan and I saw him. It was Proctor. He must have got in the way somehow. Perhaps the second shot. I don't know. One of my shots must have struck him. I heard that moan and then I found Proctor lying there. He looked at me." Grey gave a great intake of breath, his voice breaking into a sob. "He looked at me, and then the life went out of his eyes. He is dead. I have killed him."

"Grey, Grey," I could only repeat his name. Other words would not come, and if they had, he could not really have attended to what anyone said. Two men came out of the woods bearing the lifeless form of Proctor de Canis. Dr. Markham trailed wearily behind them. They bore the body past us, and we followed into the house.

The next days were chaos. Serena fell into a fevered state, oblivious to her surroundings, and for one very long day we feared she might soon follow her brother. But she rallied at last, the fever broke, and her wild delirium gave way to quiet and melancholy resignation. The Markhams stayed as long as they could, but eventually they had to return to London, although not before Dr. Markham's successor, hand-picked by himself, was in attendance. Lord Grogan had brought in nurses, and we all tended Serena with dedication.

Her affection for me, so impromptu at our first meeting, held strong, for I was one of the few people she allowed near her at the height of her fever, and I would not leave her. Never before had I so willingly engaged in selfless ministrations for another being, but Serena summoned forth what was best in us all. When she regained full consciousness, however, and the events surrounding her brother's death were clear to her, my relation to Grey im-

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posed a restraint. She bore no ill-will, leveled no hatred toward anyone for the catastrophe, yet her sensitive nature could not let her escape from anguish. Grey and I were cruel testimony to the tragedy that had befallen Proctor and herself.

During Serena's fever and early stages of recovery, Grey tried unsuccessfully to see her. While delirious with fever, the decision was made for her, but when she was able to attend to present circumstances, she refused his visit as vehemently as her weakened state would permit. Concern about this agitation on her already strained nerves prompted Lord Grogan to be quite firm. Grey must not see her. He must in fact leave the house.

Grey at first stormed and ranted. He must speak with her, must explain. Lord Grogan bore the tirades with patience and resolution. Grey must leave. This he reiterated, always as sage counsel rather than arbitrary dictate, and he left me to reason with my son.

"I must see her," Grey said again to me.

"No," I said adamantly. "It would be the worst thing in the world for you to intrude now. It would do only harm. Lord Grogan thinks you wish to see Serena to express your remorse, as I am certain you do, but I am afraid you might not leave it at that."

From the look he cast me, I knew I was right. "Lord Grogan knows nothing of the nature of your relationship with Serena. If you persist, he will know all."

"What do I care what he does or does not know," Grey shouted. "Let it come out in the open. He can challenge me, and I will meet him with pistols. Would you prefer to be his second, Mother, or mine?" He was pacing excitedly. I let him continue until he seemed to have expelled some of the inner demons driving him. When he was more calm, I tried what I could.

"You would upset Serena far too much. Her recovery is fragile as it is. I know you care about her well-being, if not about Lord Grogan's enlightenment or his continued residence in the world. You have done harm already with your guns. Remember that." He did remember, and he blanched.

"Serena is still in danger," I continued. "Her life may be in your hands, more so than in any physician's."

He sat thinking about this. As I regarded his now defeated form, I was struck with the likeness he bore to myself at his age. When not many years older than he was now, I had embarked on my relationship with his father, a passionate relationship, for I was passionate then. Was it any wonder that Grey seemed given to the same dark moods? And how often had I thought of him as my son? Wanting to distance myself from his father and from my earlier, wild self, I had kept my distance from Grey, who in my thoughts was usually his father's son rather than my own. Now I seemed able to admit this to myself, and when I looked at Grey, sitting dejectedly before me, head bowed down almost to his knees in abject misery, I remembered the despair

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I had felt when I realized Grey's father had transferred his amour to someone else. I remembered the wild abandon, the wild grief, remorse, regret.

"Grey," I began again, speaking more kindly to him than I had in many a time past. "We have not often been in agreement on any topic. I know I have not been a successful maternal presence in your life." These all seemed such false starts. How pitifully weak were all our words. Yet I must try. I sat beside him and longed to put my arms around my son, but I knew this was not the right time. He would suspect the gesture.

"I imagine you have not much use for any advice I might offer, and I have little right to interfere in your life. But you must listen to what may be my first and final attempt at being a parent to you." He was listening at least. "In these few months that we have spent together, in close quarters you might say, I have watched you, judged you. I found you to be an arrogant, conceited, egocentric copy of your father. He indulged you in your worst leanings. He never encouraged you to impose restraints on your own worst impulses, or to nurture what was best. But the arrogance, the conceit, the egocentricity — how could you escape any of them, since they were a legacy from both your parents? I see myself in you, Grey. I know the inner reaches of your soul. I have been a fine model for your worst traits. Only recently have I learned that of myself."

Grey straightened slightly. Still he listened. "You have long been a young man without direction. You have received little affection from those who owed it most to you. But not even the compounded efforts of your father and myself, I am relieved to say, were able to totally extinguish the finer elements so absent from our own conduct. I know you love Serena, and that love must awaken you to your better nature. You genuinely care for her. For the first time in your life, you probably care for someone outside yourself. Be true to that impulse, not for yourself but for Serena. Let her be happy, let her be protected. You know the kind of life she will have under Lord Grogan's care, and you know what you can offer her. Let her go, and in doing that for her, you will discover your better self, you will find your own true nature. Let her go."

Throughout, Grey had listened with varying emotions — anger, outrage, sorrow, shame — altering his countenance in succession. At the end he sat quietly, his eyes closed in weariness, head resting on the back of the settee. When I rose, he opened his eyes and regarded me almost for the first time without an underlying hostility. Placing my hands gently on his shoulders, I said to him, "We must do what we can for love." I was not quite certain what the words meant, they had come so quickly into my head. He stirred, gave a low sob, and we soon had each other clasped tight in a strong embrace, our tears falling and mingling. I held my son in my arms at last. We left the next morning for London.

We did not remain in London long, wanting a complete change, new ob-

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servations to shove aside the haunting, tragic memories of the North Country. The hot weather broke, the dog days released their hold, and we made our way across the Channel in a bad storm. Thereafter the days were clear as we journeyed eastward through the Continent, pausing briefly in Vienna, Buda-Pesth, Belgrade, after which the trains became unpredictable and, I am convinced, unpremeditated. Our object was the restive areas of the Balkans, where the Bulgarians and Turks warred over Macedonia while the rest of Europe looked on, fearful that the Russians might intercede.

It was a wild journey, for when the train lines ceased or the Danube's course lay in the wrong direction, we had to shift to motorcars if we could find them, more often to old-fashioned coaches, and even horseback on a few occasions. Thus we did travel, I writing my articles and Grey copying them, until I found that my son was quite a respectable journalist on his own. Soon he was filing his own stories and making sketches of the peasants and guerrilla fighters whom we came upon in the hills.

We chose to wander farther north than originally planned, out of curiosity, and made our way through Plevna, across the Danube, and into Rumania. We rested at Bucharest, after which there were only small villages as we traveled into the Transylvanian Alps toward their intersection with the Carpathians. This stage could be accomplished only by horseback, and we set out with a guide from one of the villages, a fierce-looking fellow whose black hair and beard had a cobalt sheen. Many nationalities dwelt among these mountains and valleys — Wallachians, Magyars, and others less amenable to orthography. Most of them descended from wild forebears such as the Huns and the Dacians.

Our guide led us up higher and higher into the mountains, from which vantage we gazed down at rich lands of grain and fruit and great murky forests of pine. As dusk came upon us that evening, we heard the eerie howling of wolves. Our guide seemed nonplussed, but I could not suppress my fears, the sound was so otherworldly. When the guide had us dismount and enter the woods, I thought he must have lost all reason or had some dark purpose in mind. He assured us our fears were unwarranted. He was merely making camp. This he did with dispatch, and we were soon comforted with a small bonfire and a surprisingly adequate meal.

It was during this meal that I chanced to see more closely our guide's broad leather belt. The peasants of the region dressed chiefly in simple white garments, draping brightly colored cloths over these. Men wore a quantity of leather over all, the most noticeable item being a remarkably broad cummerbund of leather wrapped about the torso, and this belt was sometimes tooled with complex designs. Our fierce conductor through the forest primeval wore a belt that was worked with a motif of dogs, which brought to mind Dr. Markham's tale about a village where the people used just such a design. This man would not be drawn out on the subject however, affecting to falter in his ability to speak our language or to apprehend

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much of what I attempted to say in German or the smattering of his dialect that I knew. My attempts to purchase his belt were equally in vain. I would have persisted in my efforts had not my eye caught sight of a movement in the woods surrounding our camp, which suddenly seemed to me a pitifully tiny speck in an enormous universe.

Dark shapes circled around our small clearing. We could just catch glimpses of them in the fringes between the flickering gleams from the campfire and the forest blackness. What were they? Wolves? Fear crept over me. Grey looked haggard. I wondered if the same thoughts bedeviled him, for my mind was pulled back to another woods and a different dark shape in the blackness. Again our guide was reassuring. He seemed to fear nothing, this wild man. Gruffly, he shouted into the fastness, and the shapes rustled softly, then vanished in the now quiet woods. I asked him if they were wolves, but he shook his head. Pointing to his belt, to one of the carved figures, he indicated that our visitors were in fact wild dogs. This did not comfort me as much as he seemed to think it would. I know little difference between wolf and wild dog.

Righteous exhaustion from the long and rugged journey abetted our early retiring, and soon after our meal we were wrapped in our blankets and asleep. No howling would keep us awake, though it might stir our dreams. Something it was that surely stirred mine. Usually, my dreams tend toward the mundane, far removed from the interesting territory lately being explored by Dr. Freud, so talked about while we were in Vienna. Here, however, this night, my sleep was strewn with scatterings of the past and present. I dreamt that I was walking through an extensive forest, following someone whose back was just discernible ahead through the thick growth. Whose back it was I did not know, although this seemed not to trouble me. All at once, shots cracked in the stillness, and the figure fell. I hastened to its side, fighting through the branches and brambles that clutched my skirts, and on reaching the figure, I discovered Proctor de Canis lying on the gound. Fearfully, I reached out, touched his arm, and he turned over, stretching and yawning as if aroused from sleep.

In my dream I was quite surprised and drew back from Proctor, who was smiling at me in his engaging way. I would have run away except for a hand on my shoulder staying me, and when I turned to see who this was, I looked into the strange eager face of Serena. They both regarded me then with concern, these dream de Canises, but turned, linked arms with each other, and looked up at the heavens, which somehow were now clearly visible above us despite the thickness of the forest. I looked and beheld a beauteous point of light, that same Dog Star that I had seen on a most tragic day. But the de Canises gazed on its luster with their own rapt, noble beauty, their faces shining in the reflected glow of the star. They turned back to me then, each extending a hand to me, inviting me to come to them. In my dream, I saw my own hands outstretched to them,

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but I could not see the rest of my body, nor could my hands reach theirs. They smiled, they laughed their near-silent laughs, and started to walk away. I lost sight of them as the forest seemed to swallow them up, and I wept.

It seemed to me in my dream that, as I wept, one or both of them returned, but at this juncture I woke, or think that I woke. In my half-sleeping, half-waking state, I could swear to nothing. In my dream I thought I beheld the warm eyes of Serena, her sweet face close to mine, her eyes giving me comfort as they had in life. Again I beheld that look that seemed to say, "I would spare you pain if I could." And then I was awake, looking into large brown eyes, yes. But these eyes belonged to a great dark creature that sat near me like an incubus watching over my sleep. Terror gripped me, for here was a gigantic wild dog within easy reach of my throat. My voice failed. I could not cry out.

The creature opened its immense jaws, and I saw the huge sharp teeth rimming its mouth, felt hot breath on my face. And the creature yawned. The gigantic hound merely yawned. Giving its large head a sudden shake, this wild dog gazed at me in the friendliest manner, opening its mouth again, but this time only slightly, in the form of an impish grin.

"What —?" I began, but my voice roused the creature, and it soon made off into the forest, pausing before it disappeared into the brush to give me what seemed a final salute. I heard it rustle deeper into the woods, heard a baying in the middle distance and an answering call, then a baying at an increasing distance from the camp, until it was utterly still. I noticed the first streaks of light marshaling themselves in what I could see of the sky,



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and I soon heard the morning twittering of birds in the branches above me as day broke.

I withheld my dream and this peculiar experience from Grey, not wanting to call up tragic echoes of the past, but they remained in my thoughts. I blame this preoccupation for what happened next. Too deeply into woolgathering, I failed to observe that my horse had strayed dangerously near the edge of the precipice that our trail followed up the steep incline. The guide became aware of my situation too late. By the time he barked a command to me, or to the horse — I was never quite sure which of us he addressed — my mount stumbled on some loose stones and went down on one knee, rocketing me over its head onto the ground. I was in danger of going over the edge, but both Grey and the guide were immediately to the rescue, clasping both my hands strongly in theirs and hauling me to safety.

During this incident, time seem arrested and I a casual observer of the events. Being pitched over the horse's head seemed to go quickly enough, but this was followed by interminable stretching of time as I crashed to terra firma, rolled to the precipice, and seemed to surrender terra firma once again as I dangled half over the edge. Interminable too was the time I spent looking at the hands outstretched to me, looking at my own hands feebly reaching toward theirs, and finally felt them clasp me and pull me up. An image from my dream came to me as they gripped me — of Proctor and Serena extending their hands to me. And then, I fainted.

When I regained consciousness, I was wrapped in blankets and lying on the ground, head pillowed on Grey's jacket. My son sat near me, firmly holding my hand as if he had never let go of it, relieved to see me awake and cognizant. Sharp pains pierced my chest when I attempted to rise, and I gasped.

"You must lie still," Grey said. "You may have fractured a rib, and it could pierce a lung."

"It is very inconvenient if I have," I told him, annoyed with this setback to our plans. "I have no time for doctors and hospitals."

"Then it will not distress you to learn there are no doctors or hospitals for several hundred miles," he said drily. "You have things just as you would wish them."

"I am reconsidering," I said, the pain giving me a twinge even though I had not moved a muscle. "We must do something."

"Exactly. Our guide has a plan. If we continue on, we cross again into Austria-Hungary and in two days will gain assistance. We can jury-rig a litter for you — Cralko is already at work on it — and although you will suffer some discomfort, I think we can safely move you without increasing your injuries."

"I never was very brave about these things," I said, picturing our caravan through the mountains, imagining the jounce of the litter.

"Cralko has a plan for that as well," Grey announced, producing from his pack a good-sized flask, which he offered me.

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"A little false courage?" I asked wanly.

"A great deal of slivovitz," he replied.

Thus we journeyed, Grey and Cralko taking on the burden of our labored progress, the plum brandy potent enough for me to be aware of little during the arduous trek, for which deliverance I thanked our guide many times over. I was in a fever and semiconscious when we reached a small village where I could remain until medical assistance was brought to me. This was in the form of a missionary from some small devout sect. I remember that the man looked every inch an Irishman, with his square face and red hair, but that he was Croatian and spoke an impenetrable dialect.

Enforced rest was dictated for several weeks, which layed waste all our plans, for we had intended to travel by river down to the Black Sea and once again into the Balkans, where the strife continued. This stroke of fate would prevent the completion of my reportorial obligations, something I had never failed in before. Seeing this prey on my spirits, Grey was ready with a solution. Now that I was semimended and out of danger, he would be my replacement, continuing the itinerary on his own and filing stories with my editor. It was a practical plan. It would suit perfectly. Yet I was reluctant to have him go. I had no hesitation whatsoever about his abilities. My reservations rose from a different quarter, for I had learned to love my son and value his companionship. But I would not let my selfishness stand in his way. He had the start on a fine career as a journalist, and to deny him this opportunity would be to hold him back. He set off, and I was sad to see him go, yet I shared vicariously the excitement I knew was in his heart. I had felt the same stirrings often enough in my past, setting out to face a new challenge.

I wonder if I had any premonition of what would befall him, for I remember thinking as he rode out of sight that, in such an unpredictable world, there was a chance I would not see him again. His disappearance into the blue distance seemed so final.

It was not until I reached Varna, weeks later, that I learned his fate. There, a consul met me at the dock, a thin, twitchy man who at any loud sound jumped as if a pistol had been fired near his head. Solicitous, he aided my stiff maneuverings into his carriage, and he winced with me as we jounced through the town to his quarters. When he told me about Grey, he could barely get out his words. I think he expected I would be hysterical, but the anguish cut too deep for that. I could only listen, hard and impervious as a stone, while he told me what he knew of my son's death.

Grey was traveling with a guerrilla band in the mountains, having gained the confidence of one of the leaders. The story he filed from one of these excursions received critical attention at home; he was proud of his work, eager to be off again with these courageous fighters. This time his story never got written. He was killed in the crossfire during an ambush in the hills. Grey never carried arms himself, not since we left the North Country.

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After Grey's death I lost heart. Nothing seemed to matter. If I had been with him, perhaps his death might have been prevented. If I had not let my horse wander too close to the unstable edge of the trail, I might not have received that foolish injury that kept me from my duty.

I wandered like a ghost for many months thereafter, ignoring my work, aware of little as I traveled from one country to the next, like the Flying Dutchman, unable to light. Grey was ever in my thoughts. I had found him so late in life, had him for so brief a tenure.

In Nice my mail caught up with me, and I wearily set myself to perusing with scant interest these brittle bits of life. I was surprised to see among my correspondence a letter from Dr. Markham and wondered if this was some ill-timed amorous missive. But no, it was one more crushing blow. Markham wrote to tell me that Serena had died in childbirth, leaving behind a son and daughter, twins, who were weak from their early struggle into this world but were likely to live. Henry, he wrote, was devastated.

I should have accorded Dr. Markham more credit, for he was a good man and not such a fool as his search for woman's acclaim made him seem. His letter was clever in what it left unsaid. Nowhere did he say, "Go to Lord Grogan." Nowhere did he say, "It is for your own good as much as his." Nowhere did he say, "There are two dear children in need of care." Yet I heard these words as if someone spoke them in my ear, some voice at once gentle yet with an underlying gruffness that gave the sounds a peculiar tone, said in a peculiar accent that I still had not placed in all my travels. Serena and Proctor seemed to speak to me, to my heart, and I answered the way I now knew I could. Having dispatched a wire to Henry, I packed up my things and hastened for the depot. And it seemed the right thing, to be going home.

I could never completely give myself over to domesticity — to do so would be to forsake what I am, and I believe we must hold true to that. But with some adjustments, which I grant were not always easily accomplished, I have been able to share my life, to share love with those who need me, to guide and inspire them, and to provide a constant, reassuring presence in their lives.

in re: digital

i do not trust the digital packaging of truth;
i have analog eyes and analog ears and i want
analog reality, not
stop-motion/clay-mation/gumbyland views of
the way it mostly seems to be.
in the land of the digital metriphiliacs i
am an analog-retentive.

— W. Gregory Stewart

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Inflections

The Readers

Readers and writers, take note! Please be aware that all materials — manuscript submissions, letters to the editor, subscription problems — should be sent to our editorial office: Amazing® Stories, *P.O. Box 111, Lake Geneva WI 53147-0111.*

— Patrick Lucien Price

Gentlemen,

I wish to register my objection to Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" as contained in the July 1989 issue.

Surely you must have Christians as readers and this "editorial" was extremely offensive!

Sincerely,
Ada Epley
6357 Otis Road
North Port FL 34187

Yes, Ada, many of our readers are Christian, but the importance of one's religious affiliations was not the issue of Mr. Silverberg's column. His point was that personal religious beliefs and biases should be perpetuated at home or at one's place of worship, not *in schools where children of many cultures and religions come together to develop a scientific understanding of their world.*

— Patrick Lucien Price

Dear Mr. Price,

I have read *Amazing® Stories* off and on for years. So when I bought my March 1989 issue and read a few stories, I became very upset. Usually, if I don't care for something, I quit buying it. That's the way it is with most consumers, but it's really not fair not to let the editor know why you've quit buying his product. As editor of *Amazing Stories,* I am aiming this straight at you. Maybe it should be aimed at Mr. Cook who probably sets the policies of buying stories.

I was grossed out by "Restricted To The Necessary" by John Barnes. I could not finish the story after I got to the part of the human (I assume he was human, since I couldn't stand to read the rest of the story) makes "love" (as he calls it) with an animal. This is perversion, not good reading.

Feeling sick and dirty, I quit reading that story and leafed over to "A Choice of Wines" by Susan Shwartz. But, when this professor in her story starts feeling the real need for two cold showers after looking at a student, I went no farther. That had set the mood of the story.

I, and most people, like stories that uplift, give you a boost, energize you afterward; that hey, it's not so bad to have to go out and change the oil in the car. Or, I feel good. I think I'll jump right up and run that vacuum through the house right now. Or, that put a smile off and on your face throughout the day as you play the story back through your mind.

I have the replay of a man and animal jumping each others bones. Or a professor who looks at women with the strong need for cold showers. If you want erotica, at least advertise that's what you're going for so people who don't want to feel like trash after

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reading it won't innocently buy it.

This trend toward erotica has been picking up steam, not only in *Amazing Stories,* but in other SF magazines and SF books. It's upsetting and I don't like it.

You say, "Get real, lady. If animals and people are kept together constantly, desires take over." Or, "If people are kept together, desires take over." No, we're not animals. We have a will and, supposedly, control. Where's some idealism? Gee, I miss that.

[I miss] people who honestly get committed to each other and not eye the next bed to jump into. Have you ever noticed that our heroes are not much better than our villains?

Do all the stories you receive have dirt in them? There's not one good storyteller out there who can tell a good tale without leaving the reader feeling unclean? Is it necessary to titillate (or attempt to) the reader's sexual urges? What kind of readership is *Amazing Stories* going for? Sex sells. I'm so sick of hearing that.

Give us readers a boost. Give us a good story that energizes us and leaves us feeling clean.

Sincerely,
Connie S. Reynolds
9194 Autumn Road
Bowerston OH 44695

Every scene and each bit of dialogue within a story we publish must present the idea of the tale, promote its plot, or develop its characters. We publish nothing of a "gratuitous" nature.

In "Restricted to the Necessary," intelligence and freedom of expression are not limited by one's physical form, one's species. Pyotr, the narrator, lives according to these societal standards, whereas Eric is bothered by them but tries to be tolerant, tries to "fit in." The "sick and dirty" scene you mention depicts the realities that Eric had difficulty accepting, an attitude that led to his demise. Without this scene, Eric's abhorrence could not be understood and appreciated by the reader.

In "A Choice of Wines," Maria Paleologus is a modern-day Circe. Therefore, Barres's reactions to her presence is understandable. From his response, the reader appreciates his predicament. Without it, his fears and doubts seem unreasonable.

— Patrick Lucien Price

Dear Mr. Price,

I enjoyed John Betancourt's essay, "The Faery King on Epsilon Eridani III: Science Fiction in Genre Fantasy," that appeared in the May 1989 issue of *Amazing Stories.*

I agree with his assertion that science fiction and genre fantasy can be blended to mutual benefit of both and create a good story in the process. Limiting oneself to a single genre is for purists, and creativity is anything but "pure." In my experience some of the best ideas have come from unexpected trains of thought. The allure of fiction — especially science fiction and fantasy — is that it stimulates the imagination, thereby exciting the reader, thereby compelling him, or her, to turn the page. It is not important how it does this so long as it is done *well.*

Inevitably, as writers cross genre boundries in order to create new, hybrid forms of fiction and the resulting words are read by a larger number of people hungry for something different from the established tracts (as is human nature), Betancourt's viewpoint will be taken for granted. I would even go so far as to say that cross-genre fiction might even become a "genre" in itself. Imagine an inter-galactic-mystery-western-fantasy-horror-

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romance-mainstream epic that breaks all the rules even as it reinvents them. Such a work could have the potential of either being brilliant or a mess, but no one will know until it is written.

> There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.
> — Hamlet, Act I, Scene 5 (which, besides being a tragedy, is also a ghost story, a love story, a whodonit and a meditation on existence)

Thank you for an enlightening essay. I look forward to reading more of Betancourt's work and *Amazing Stories* in the future.

Sincerely,
Steven Lawrence
1015 E. Meadowbrook
Phoenix AZ 85014

Dear Sir:

I would like to see more science-fiction stories published that explore social and economic themes in terms of how we deal with such problems — especially, I would like to see solutions.

The world's population reached five billion during November of 1987, and it is increasing at an alarming rate — it could double in another forty years. Right here in "the good old USA," millions are homeless or starving. Polution (land, sea, and air) is a significant problem, and there are many others. There is no shortage of ideas.

Sincerely yours,
James T. Sizemore
318 Hale Avenue
Romeoville IL 60441

Readers, please continue to send us your letters. We'd like to read about your likes and dislikes; this way we can better serve your needs. After all, you are *reading this magazine for personal enjoyment. Also, feel free to respond to other issues — be they about writing, the SF and fantasy community, or the state of affairs in the world at large. We do value your opinions, though we may not agree with them. So, write to us!*

Till next issue.
— Patrick Lucien Price

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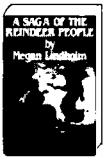
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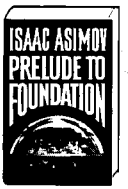
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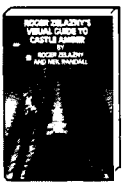
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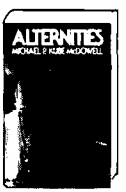
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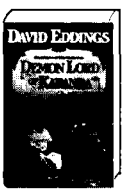
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